

# *Asian Trash Cinema*

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**Rumours regarding Jackie Chan continue:**

Apparently he's on a break-neck schedule... making movies non-stop, back-to-back. Supposedly, he has already stockpiled over twenty-five films. As the story goes-- he plans to release the films at the rate of two per year; while he grows old, his cinematic image will never age. Shades of Dorian Grey, in reverse.



# Asian Trash Cinema

Co-Editors: Craig Ledbetter and Tom Weisser ★ Design/Artwork: Franchise Doll

## Editorial

from CRAIG LEDBETTER

Take a look at this issue. For the first time I think we have reached an equilibrium in the coverage of Hong Kong and Japanese Genre Cinema. And with it, many new contributors have appeared.

Thanks to comics artist Ron Wilber (Eros Comics' *Domino Lady* and other titles), ATC now has its first original cover artwork. Noted Crime novelist Max Allan Collins (check out his novel, *In The Line Of Fire* based on the new Clint Eastwood movie) contributes a lengthy essay on the *Lone Wolf with Child* series and promises to become a regular feature writer within these pages.

I'm especially proud to print a review by Asian Film expert David Chute. David was responsible for piquing my interest in Japanese and Hong Kong cinema many years ago in his articles for *Film Comment* (the only mainstream film publication worth a damn!). David hopes appearing here will gain him some "street credibility"; I only hope it doesn't ruin his reputation.

Along with ATC veterans Eric Sulev (who marries megababe Monica Weber this summer) and John Grace, other new faces include Mark Rolffe and *Skam*'s own Richard Akiyama, all of whom came through to make this edition my favorite so far.

And, let me thank all the letter writers who have taken the time to comment on what's right and wrong with ATC (even Mr Anonymous' asshole buddy who makes an appearance). You're what makes all this worth doing!

Finally, if you want in on the ground floor of a newsletter covering Godzilla and other Japanese monsters, check out *Kaiju Review*. Contact Dan Reed at 301 East 64th Street, Suite 5F, New York, NY 10021.



*Regarding the beauty on the back cover: HK starlet Woo Suk-Hong is predominantly featured in the sexy horror film Witchcraft Vs Curse.*



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with commentary by co-editor Tom Welser

# LETTERS

To ATC editors:

Well, it was only a matter of time before somebody would write such a courageous letter as the one you received from the gentleman (?) who bravely signed himself Anonymous. Yes sir, the true gesture of someone who was willing to stand behind his words and ravings!

To put it in language that I'm sure Mr Anonymous will understand, what the fucking hell is the big deal about ATC or ETC being published by the owner of Video Search Of Miami? If you had done a bit of research or utilized your intellect (am I taking too much for granted?) you would have discovered that such a practice is not unusual! The most famous example was Warren Publishing's *Captain Company* and its line of merchandise plugged in their own magazines, *Famous Monsters*, *Eerie*, *Creepy* and *Vampirella*.

And then there is the case of *Starlog* Publication magazines such as *Starlog* or *Fengoria*. Guess who advertises their products within its pages? And how about *Filmfax*? Ever notice that huge section of assorted videos offered for sale by... very good, you guessed it!

The crime you hysterically accused and denounced Tom Welser for is about as terrible as a major TV network promoting its own shows on its own network.

Your hysterical accusation/diatribe of ATC and ETC being one-sided, one-dimensional and biased smacks of the kind of mentality that claims: "I am the only one who knows what is right, mine is the only opinion that counts; the rest of you know nothing!"

Now before you start accusing me of "stooging" for these publications or Tom Welser or VS&M, let me put myself on the line:

A. I know Craig Ledbetter. This will immediately condemn me in your eyes as one of the "evil ones." Craig and I are friends from numerous phone conversations (which make us deeply beloved by the phone company) and/or letters. We have never met... yet he's one of the most straight-forward people I have encountered in my

years as a film buff. he won't roll over and play dead for something that, say, VS&M is putting out if it is lousy. he'll speak up and tell you if it is bad and point out all of its faults!

B. I do not know Tom Welser personally. I have never been a customer of his company. However, from my reading of the various issues of ETC and ATC, I firmly believe that his being the publisher of the two magazines, as well as VS&M's owner, has not exerted any influence or control over what the magazines have to say.

Unlike other publications which seem to go out of their way not to offend the companies or studios whom they depend on for material (information, pics, etc), they don't pull punches. If you don't believe me, check out any of Craig's editorials or articles! He really speaks his mind! As he said in ETC#7's letter column, "what else can you expect from one of those Texans?"

As far as I'm concerned, ATC and ETC do what they're supposed to do and they do the job well, along with such other excellent 'zines like *Video Watchdog*.

--Eric Hoffman

Hey Assholes!

I don't know who wrote the balley anonymous letter in ATC#3, but he (and I'm sure it was a he, because he wrote like he was swinging a big dick, something bitches can't do) he cut a fucking wide path! He gets a medal from me for saying something I was thinking. Your magazine sucks. You write about shit I can't find anywhere and then you tell me to buy it from a mail-order company that you're in bed with! What kind of shit is that? This is fucking America, man! If it's not in our Blockbuster, we don't fucking need it! I'm sorry I ever subscribed to your sorry magazine.

--Clyde Bergman

Frankly, just thinking about you as a subscriber makes me nauseous. Craig and I have already sent a full refund to you. I can only say, after reading your letter, it's obvious that interbreeding was a popular sport in your family. And I bet you're alot of fun at parties.

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Dear ATC:

This is a reply from one of your readers who is pissed off regarding the first letter in ATC #3.

If I could walk into a book store in my area and get all the information I wanted on the Asian Horror scene I might not need this magazine. It's the same with films. What I'm looking for is simply not available through video stores. They don't know most of it even exists. I am glad someone like Video Search Of Miami has the initiative to make these films available at reasonable prices.

When you're paying hard earned dollars for something, you want to know if you're going to like what you buy. Thank you Pompano (Tom) for helping me sort through what I do and don't want.

In closing, you guys can call yourselves anything you want and plug whomever you want. Just keep your insight and especially your reviews coming!  
--Kevin Thompson

Hey ATC guys:

Congrats on the most recent issue of ATC, the lay-out is most professional and the addition of color is a nice little touch of class.

Where would we seekers of sordid thrills be without you people? If it weren't for ATC and ETC, guys like me would be forced to rely on other Pengoria (and the like) which would have us believe nothing of worth is being produced outside the American market.

One word of unasked-for advise: cut down on the plot refreshes. With the exception of Mosses, Welser and Ledbetter, far too much time is spent on storytelling. Your writers are a talented bunch, so make them tell us what it is, specifically, they like—or don't like—about a film. The absence of the loathsome and tediously pedantic Horacio Higuchi from recent issues suggests you are aware of this minor problem and are well on your way to correcting it.

Please keep up the wonderful work. ATC and ETC are perhaps the only publications I read from cover to cover and look forward to finding in my mailbox. Love on ya,

Dominick Salemi the Brutarian

*I enjoyed your latest issue of Brutarian, especially the Mentors interview [Yes, heterosexuals do have the right to Rock and Roll].*

Craig

ATC #3's cover was the most striking yet! Didn't you say it was created by Jeff Smith? Or somebody else? Definitely poster worthy!

*[We agree Jeff Smith is a good artist, but the credit for ATC's Godzilla/King Ghidrah cover*

*goes to Toho's marketing department. And it is, in fact, a poster.]*

The rear cover was also very nice. I'm a big fan of the Cheungster. Even with clothes on, she's an eye-fu! The photographs and artwork distributed throughout ATC #3 were well-chosen, and except for the Godzilla pic on page 13, they are original and new to me.

As you mentioned many months ago, your determination to balance Hong Kong material with Japanese productions (plus other, even lesser known, Asian entries) is something I felt was best for ATC. The Chinese films are currently securing a growing audience, due to ATC's groundbreaking first issue [Thank you], thus the way is being paved for fresh, new obscurities. A fanzine such as ATC can prove to be a learning experience.

Keep the letter column fat and juicy. Many tidbits and conflicting P.O.V.'s are fun to read. As for the opening "fuck-you letter"—I believe it's the work of a certain Hollywood vermin who has attacked Tom, Video Search and ATC in the past. The anonymous, curt letter bears his stamp.

*[While it may bear his stamp, it didn't bear his postmark. The infamous "fuck-you letter" was mailed from New York.]*

I enjoyed your reviews. And I wanted to mention, a variation of *Midnight Angel* is *Deadly Dream Woman*, which blends elements of *Between* and *God Of Gamblers*. The *Sukeben Deka* piece was interesting. Hopefully, author Alex Simmons (is he from the Damon Foster school of reviewers?) will keep an eye on them.

The highlight of ATC #3 was the Yakuza piece. After reading the letter column, I immediately turned to it. Having seen Goshu's *Streets Of Black Fury* and the earlier *Emblem Of A Man* (aka *Wolves*), I needed to learn more about Yakuza films. Are all Japanese gangsters called Yakuza? Domestically, the term "Mafia" is now burdened with an adjective: *Black Mafia*, *Jewish Mafia*, *Armen Mafia* (etc). Japan is not so ethnically diverse.

--Jeff Segal

*Perhaps your comments describing Japan as "not so ethnically diverse" are correct, but Katsuhiko Otomo's film World Apartment Horror suggests otherwise. Seemingly—unfortunately—prejudices is a world-wide mania.*

Craig and Tom.

I recently received issue #3 of *Asian Trash Cinema*. It's great! Your 'zine covers a wide, variety of material, plus the Jade Laung interview

was cool! She was terrific in *Black Cat* and I appreciate the indepth view.

And the back cover color picture of Maggie Cheung was greatly appreciated. She's my favorite Hong Kong actress and also the most beautiful. A picture of her in every issue would be a good feature!

--Channing Smith

We can't promise a pic of Maggie Cheung in every issue-- the word "overkill" comes to mind-- but take a look below...

Dear Craig:

I was so disappointed to see an old publicity photo of Meggie Cheung used as a back cover that I sent you a clipping. This is from a Hong Kong gossip rag and featuring Meggie...



It's about time somebody did an article on the Yakuza movies! Chris D did an exhaustive job and I can't wait to read the next two parts. Forrest Batson's laserdisc reviews were very useful. I don't own a disc player, but many of my traders do, so it's great to know the real quality of what they're offering.

I'm sure you've heard that Columbia Pictures is working on a new Godzilla flick, and they want James Cameron to direct it. Is nothing sacred? [Apparendynot] Also, to insure an "R" rating, John Woo will only kill about 20 people in his new film *Hard Target*. Damn those moral majority fascists of the MPAA!

--John Grace

It's difficult to imagine anything quite as absurd as an equation for violence. Exactly, how does that work? 10 deaths = PG? or 15 deaths = PG-13? Does that mean *Last House On The Left* should be re-rated as a "G" since only 6 people got killed?

Dear Craig,

Of course I was surprised to find out that Pompano Joe Torrez (of *Video Search*) was the same person as your co-editor/publisher Tom Weisser. Although I'm not outraged like Mr Anonymous was in his ATC3 letter, I find it fascinating that Tom was able to keep the secret for so long. I'm curious about what he taught at Miami Dade University. I have a friend who went to college in Miami and thinks he had Tom for a teacher. He says Tom taught a Radio Promotion/Marketing course-- that the students called him "the mad Professor" and once he told the class that he would "never fail a girl in a mini skirt." The popular rumor was he was fired for marrying one of his students. Is any of this true? --Robert Chapman

*I was a member of the English/Communication Arts Faculty, teaching mostly creative writing courses and various radio/television workshops. And due to my background in the record business, I also taught a Radio Promotion Class. Regarding the rumors you mentioned: I'm not aware of being called "The mad Professor" (although it wouldn't surprise me).*

*I wasn't fired for marrying a student (there were no student/teacher fraternization rules at Miami-Dade) but, the demands a two part answer: 1) I wasn't fired from the university-- I quit teaching when VSOM became profitable enough to support me; and 2) I didn't marry the student-- Allison and I were engaged, but it didn't work out.*

*And lastly, I think the comment actually was: "I'd never fail a pretty girl in a mini skirt."*

Dear ATC--

I agree with Forrest Batson's review of *The Killer* laserdisc. The quality stinks, as does almost everything from Golden Cinema City. Considering the fact that GOC releases all the Woo films on

disc, this is a tragedy of massive proportions. The latest casualty of GCC's appalling presentation style is *Woo's Hard-Boiled*. The film, released on two discs (one running 89 minutes, the other 35 minutes) is cut in at least 30 places. The soundtrack is intermittently dreadful and the transfer, like *The Killer*, is washed out and contrary. After the disgusting debacle that was the one-disc release of *Bullet in the Head*, I was certain GCC would do for *Hard-Boiled* what *Bullet* deserved. They have not. One can only hope that an American company will release the complete Woo films to disc one day (*don't hold your breath*). That *Hard-Boiled*, one of the best action films ever, is disfigured this way by its distributor, is an international tragedy.

Just a note: In Eric Sulev's discussion of *Hard-Boiled* in ATC3, he identified the "ruthless gun-runner" as Phillip Chen. The gun-runner is, in fact, Anthony Chen who also appeared recently in *Now You See Love Now You Don't* and Ringo Lam's *Full Contact*, another instant HK classic. Phillip plays Chow Yun-Fat's boss in the film.

--Mark Savage in Australia

Dear ATC:

I was initially overjoyed to see an article on *Sukeban Deka*, my favorite Japanese TV show, in ATC#3. I was surprised that anyone of your magazine knew about it and delighted to see it getting greater exposure.

Well, as you can imagine, I was alot less overjoyed after reading the article, particularly since it turned out that the writer, Alex Simmons, didn't know anything about *Sukeban Deka* after all. My knowledge is fairly limited, but I'll share what I know and perhaps other readers can fill in the blanks and correct errors.

*Sukeban Deka* was originally a Japanese comic. It was made into a live-action TV series, which went through three incarnations (Series 1, 2 and 3). Most recently, it was made into an animated video series. I haven't seen any of Series 1, but I know it starred Yuki Saito, a well-known singing idol. Series 2 starred Yohko Minamino, another popular pop singer. Fans who understand Japanese seem to prefer this series over Series 3, possibly because the stories are more complex. However, except for the final episode, I really don't care for it much. They're just too talky for a Japanese-language-impaired person like myself.

Series 3 is the one I like. Lots of action. Good production values. Good direction. Good music. And the women are cuter than the ones in Series 2. --All three stars developed singing careers

through the show. Yui (Yui Asaka) seems to be the most successful and is still quite active. (She sings the ending credit theme *Shooting Star*). Yuma (Yume Nakamura) and Yuko (Yuko Onishi) have each released several albums. There's also a couple CDs and a live concert videotape of the three singing as *Sukeban Deka*. The videotape is a fascinating look at how the Japanese package their idol singers.

Yui has also appeared in a live-action movie of *Yawara* (a Japanese comic and animated TV series about a reluctant female judo star). The movie wasn't as good as the animated series, but when it got past the parts of the story I knew, I enjoyed it. And the older Yui is gorgeous.

As detailed in Alex's article, there are two *Sukeban Deka* movies. Although Series 3 was airing at the time of the first movie, Yohko Minamino returns for the starring role. I'm not sure why this was (perhaps either audience expectation or contractual obligations), but you'll notice they make a big deal at the end of the movie of writing her character out of future shows. Note that in one scene Yohko brings down a helicopter with her yo-yo! (Must be a pretty long string!)

In response to specific points in Alex's article:

1. The girls are wearing the sailor-suit dresses that Alex finds unbelievable because this is the standard school uniform that Japanese girls wear.

2. Yohko Minamino isn't loading her yo-yo with bullets. She's loading them with weights, which makes her yo-yo capable of knocking down steel doors and such. It also means her yo-yo injures her every time it comes back, which is why she's holding her arm like that and why she barely makes it to the end of the movie.

3. As should be obvious from the above, the movies did not spawn the TV series, the TV series (plural) spawned the movies.

--Kent Johnson

Hi, Craig!

Good to see you in business again with ATC #3, and what a gorgeous cover! If I hadn't seen this poster art before I perhaps would have collapsed. An absolutely insane greet scene! I'm sharing my opinion with Jeff Smith, the actual movie is a mediocre thing but anyway, who cares?

ATC's coverage of Yakuza movies is incredible! The first mag I know doing this. What a surprise! I haven't seen much of this stuff over here. Keep up the great work!

--Maerz in Germany



Dear Craig & Tom--

I'm very glad you printed my reviews and the article on Godzilla in ATC #3. Here's some additional information on Rikky O (aka Story Of Rikky, Riki Oh (the animated series title), and most correctly, Rikiki O). It's directed by Nani Lal-Chol of Peacock King and Erotic Ghost Story fame. I asked the Golden Harvest people at the MIFed convention if the movie was successful and they said it did okay, although they didn't know if a sequel would be made. I'm crossing my finger! Incidentally, if you pronounce Rikiki O very fast-- in Italian slang, it means "a tag from Naples."

--Max Della Mora from Italy

ATC:

#3 was another great issue. And definitely the best cover yet!! I enjoyed Max's Godzilla piece-- I never knew the big rubber monster made so many cameo appearances in non-Godzilla films.

The only article I didn't much care for was Sukeben Detective. The writing style didn't seem to fit in with the rest of the issue's contents. Loved the color middle pages; Jade Leung sure is a beauty based on the page 21 pic!

The Yakuza film article/filmography was the highlight of the issue. These films sound interesting, but not my type of movie. The article was well written and covered a new sub-genre of Asian films not covered before.

--Dan Pydynkowski

ATC editors:

I loved ATC #3 despite the problems. The Sukeben Deke piece was completely off-base, missing the entire flavor of the movie. Author Alex Simmons was more interested in being cute, than being fair to the film! The two Sukeben Deke films I've seen are incredible examples of well-constructed, Japanese action pics. Simmons needs to quit jerking himself off.

Secondly, I think it's adventurous of you to cover different types of Asian movies-- but do we really need 11 pages of Yakuza, with two more installments to come? I'm sure Chris D means well, but he manages to make every film sound alike. The plots can't really be so interchangeable, can they? There has to be something which distinguishes them from each other. Perhaps this is the most obvious deterrent from reviewing foreign language prints. It's obvious Chris didn't understand the story. All he's reviewing are images, which (without the benefit of plot) are insignificant. Certainly not worthy of 11 pages!

--George Pafino

Craig and Tom:

I really enjoyed Chris D's survey of Yakuza films, but I can't believe Chris thinks these films ever rise to the level of violence found in a Hong Kong gangster film. The last fifteen minutes of A Better Tomorrow 2 has yet to be topped (for style and mayhem) in any shoot-em-up I've seen, including the subsequent films of John Woo.

Max Della Mora's cataloging of big Godzilla's various appearances could have used a stronger editorial hand. Considering how many Godzls needs may have plunked down \$8 for your magazine (because of the cover), I think you could have provided more coverage of the Toho productions rather than the low budget porn parodies and incidental costume appearances that I imagine most fans couldn't care less about.

--Dan Reed

Craig and Tom:

It's my opinion that you guys are responsible for, without a doubt, two of the best magazine currently available on any topic. You should be very proud.

ATC3 was especially superb. Rikiki O sounds like one hell of a film. I wrote to Video Search Of Miami and found the catalog truly amazing. There are literally hundreds of films I want to order. That brings me to Anonymous-- What the fuck is the problem with the Anonymous (how courageous!) asshole of ATC3's letter page. What a heinous "conspiracy" you guys are behind! How dare you give us the lowdown on Asian/European cinematic gems (and duds) and then make them available to the fans at damn good prices!! Tom, I congratulate you for operating VS&M and for co-founding/contributing to Craig's magazines. Pompano Joe's reviews are great and he adds alot of flavor to ETC, pseudonymous or not. In Anonymous has a problem with such petty truths then why is he/she even bothering to read your 'zines? I get the impression this sorry shithead doesn't even like Asian/Euro films-- and if that's the case, then let him choke to death on a copy of Ghoulies Go To College.

--Heath Gibney in Australia

Tom and Craig:

It was good to see the Godzilla cover/review. Although the Hong Kong films are the current fave (and deservedly so), I think for most of us the Toho monster films were our introduction to Asian cinema. Did you notice that Inoshiro Honda (veteran Godzilla director) died recently? (or as Variety always spells it, Ishiro Honda-- do you

know which is correct?) (According to Amy Aasi, our Japanese translator, Inoshiro is correct)

I noticed there's a new, \$40 million American Godzilla film being made. Don't ask me why. Maybe the Charles Barkley/Godzilla commercial was a big enough hit. It's good to see Godzilla making such a strong comeback, no matter what the reason.

(Even though America is planning a Godzilla film, Japan's Toho continues to churn them out. Godzilla Vs Queen Mothra is currently in theatrical release. And Godzilla Vs Mechagodzilla is scheduled for early '94)

It was news to me that Tom Weisser is Pompano Joe Torrez of VSoM, but who really cares? Your 'zine is informative and well-done. Any 'zine that turns me on to great (or bad, but enjoyable) films I might not have discovered on my own is OK by me. It sounds like the anonymous letter-writer is a jealous competitor of ETC/ATC and/or VSoM. It's not like you're pushing Video Search films—we're not talking about Warren/Captain Company here. If there should be any complaints of this nature they should be directed at Filmfax and its reviews and ads for its own products (or should I say higher priced Sluister Cinema and Video Yesterday products?), not your 'zines.

Also concerning ATC #3: On Page 6, in answer to George Lambert's letter— you wrote that Amy Yip has done only one nude scene. Yet in his review of Robotix in ATC #1, Tom Weisser refers to her as "former X-porn star Amy Yip." I know the Japanese have always denied the existence of pubic hair— but don't tell me Asian porn stars keep their clothes on in their films.

—Brian Quinn

In '91, when I wrote the original Hong Kong reviews for ATC/Naked! Screaming! Terror!, I was voyaging in uncharted waters. As a result, there are some unfortunate inaccuracies in the reviews. Since then, mostly thanks to our readers, many of the errors are getting cleaned up.

Regarding Amy Yip and X-Rated pornography, I was very wrong. My initial comments were based on a British article which claimed she found stardom in "sexually explicit adult productions." In reality, she began her career by co-hosting a Hong Kong sex-n-satire television program, similar to our Saturday Night Live. And although many of the skits included nudity, apparently Amy always kept her clothes on. Too bad.

However, one of our readers Merlin David from Samurai Video was kind enough to send us a rare publicity photo from Sex And Zan which shows off Amy Yip's enormous... charm.



Craig and Tom,

I think ATC #3 is the best issue yet. The layout continues to look better and better. The Japanese film coverage is always a very welcome feature. I especially like Chris D's article on Yakuza films. This is an area of film that deserves more attention. I'm sure some people will complain about the lack of reviews in ATC3, but what's great about ETC and ATC is they don't follow any set format. Too bad about the Maggie Cheung article, but the back cover photo was nice (even if it did show less than previous back covers).

One other note: Bullat For Hire was also released on Ocean Shore Laserdisc in an unletterboxed version. I don't know how it compares to the World Video disc mentioned in Forrest Batson's article but I seem to remember it being of fairly good visual quality.

—Richard Akiyama

Asian Trash Cinema:

A friend in San Francisco picked up ATC3 for me, because he thought it would interest me. Lovely front and back cover! But one gets the impression you think your readership is all male. C'mon guys, I have NO interest in McLaren Lu's tits! Why don't you blow up that photo on page 31 and use it for the back cover? (Ms White is referring to the pic of Takakura Ken, in case your copy of ATC3 isn't handy)

Treasure Chris D! Someone who writes a good, informative article, knows what he's talking about, should be encouraged. Thank you, thank you, Chris D! Why do I single out Chris D? Because anyone can sit down, watch a video they know nothing about, and tell you what they think is

going on. You publish their efforts. Give Sukeben Deka to Travis Crawford. Let Alex Simmons watch Rikki O, and see what their opinions are. Will Travis say "See this Sukeben Deka film immediately!" ...After reading Travis' plot synopsis, I won't waste my time with Rikki O. So I took out my Sukeben Deka movie and I'm enjoying it right now.

There have been at least 3 Sukeben Deka TV series, at least one of them (probably two) made before this movie. There have also been two ripoff TV series, Hens No Aseku Gumi and Shojo Commendo Izumi, with more schoolgirls from hell. I just figured out what Alex Simmons has against Sukeben Deka, he would rather see them wearing mini-skirts!

...I also enjoyed reading the latter-column reviews, LD guide, and Eric Sulay's look at Hard-Boiled. There's a big difference between an enthusiastic recommendation for Hard-Boiled (I was glued to the screen for 2+ hours) and for the real trash like Rikki O.

*[I'm not sure I understand this difference. It seems to me both Travis and Eric have similar writing styles. Do you think "synopsis reviews" are okay when the film is "quality" --and not okay when the film is "trash"?]*

By the way, I think your spelling is incorrect for Urotsukidoji (you spell it Urotosukideji). There's Urotsukidoji Episodes 1/2/3 and Part 2 including Episodes 1 and 2. And I hear another one has just been released. By the way, there is a LEGIT subtitled copy of Urotsukidoji being released by US Manga Corps this summer.

--Laurine White

Thanks for your comments. And yes, Menge is releasing a version of Urotosukideji [Urotsukidoji] this summer. Apparently it is the edited British version dubbed into English, better known as *Night Of The Over-Fiend*— with the "extreme violence and graphic sex" excised out [the same version has been shown theatrically in various USA cities]. There is a chance the complete versions will be released "officially" in the future. Meanwhile, all the original Japanese episodes are available with English subtitles from VSOA, including —not one— but 2 new episodes!

Dear ATC:

With regards to your magazine, I would like to express my astonishment and respects to the editors for you your wide knowledge of such films from the orient. Being an oriental myself, I can't help but acknowledge the memories that these films brought back when I picked up ATC #1. I

fascinate the hell out of me that westerners are actually taking notice of such films.

I would like to express certain flaws that you had concerning your reviews. Now, I have seen practically 89% of the films you reviewed and would like to point out that certain films you stated had come from Malaysia. This is incorrect. Malaysia, being an Islamic country has its boundaries in making films, much less marketing any. The film industry in that country is in shambles and due to lack of talent and government intervention, it won't become any better. I believe most of the films credited to Malaysia are actually from India, Viet Nam or the Philippines.

I would like to shed some light on some films you reviewed, and give you another side of how most Hong Kong audiences would react. I must stress— I do not mean to offend, but merely give you another aspect of how an oriental would view these films.

A Better Tomorrow 2 was based on a script which was of the worst quality, because of the fact that Hong Kong triads (which control most of the film industry) wanted a sequel done quickly. This is to ensure alot of money being made by banking on the gangster-crazed movies that were making money at the time. It literally destroyed the integrity and respect that the first Tomorrow laid down.

A Better Tomorrow 3 was a classic film in its very own sense. The deviation from the first two allows it to take on a more realistic understanding of the character "Mark" (Chow Yun Fat). The HK critics loved it and many people think it's the most exemplary in the aspect of film art (this can also be said of Ringo Lam's *City On Fire*).

Chinese Ghost Story was the first of its kind, unique in its adoption of fantasy and Chinese folklore. However, after this successful film, the copy-cats that followed destroyed the whole richness of the myth. As for Part 2 and 3, they really sucked. The director was trying to outdo the first film but failed miserably and he even admitted it in one of the Hong Kong magazines.

...As for Jackie Chen, about his goofiness, and why he does it— this is a very good question. If you've seen his movies since he was young, you'd notice his characters are always goofy, and the audiences want that from him. Chan's charm has always been based on the humor he projects in his characters.

--Tim Kwok

Thank you for sharing your opinions. But I still don't understand why Jackie Chen needs to mug for the camera.



# Reviews

## EMERGENCY! LIVING DEAD IN TOKYO BAY (1991)

DIRECTED BY

KAZUO "GAIRA" KOMIZU

REVIEWED BY CRAIG LEDBETTER

When was the last time you saw a good foreign rip-off of the myths created by George Romero's trilogy of films (NIGHT, DAWN, DAY OF THE DEAD)? Most likely it was of European origins and so, more apt to be covered in ETC. How in the Hell did one slip into Asian Trash Cinema? Well, thanks to VSOM (NOTE TO MY ENEMIES: Yes, I'm going to review a film that my Publisher has sub-titled and is offering for sale. Since this will no doubt have you shrieking in anger, please GO FUCK YOURSELF for the duration of this review.) we now have EMERGENCY! LIVING DEAD IN TOKYO BAY, a true-blue ATC entry into the Romero Living Dead Universe.

The film was made in 1991 and directed by (Gaira) Kazuo Komizu, who a few years earlier made ENTRAILS OF A VIRGIN. Like that film, he is forced, through ingenuity, to accomplish a lot, with very little money. You end up respecting his directorial abilities, but become frustrated by the fact that his over reaching ambitions can't be visualized on the screen (I'm sure Gaira feels the same way).

The film opens with a cheesy, poorly executed shot of a meteor landing in Tokyo Bay. A toxic cloud of vapor quickly covers the city and we learn the military has clamped down on all persons attempting to enter or leave Tokyo. The film soon centers on Keiko (Curti Suzuki), the daughter of a military man, Itsu Kirihere. He has left behind a video explaining that she must seek out the leader of a group of Scavengers (who are routinely killing off the non-infected citizenry) and destroy him. Keiko discovers a BATMAN-like costume that her father built to aid her in this mission. The suit is not only filled with gadgets, it's bullet-proof and has a Robo-cap helmet, complete with computer readouts.

By now, groups of zombies are roaming the city, killing and eating their way through the population. Keiko teams up with a group of Punks (complete with green hair and give-a-shit

attitudes) who sell weapons to the highest bidders. They discover that the leader behind the Scavengers is a renegade General named Hugeloke (an excellent performance by Tomoko Hayase) who is injecting the meteor spawned virus (which either kills instantly or creates a controllable zombie) into his prisoners to produce a Monster army.

Keiko defeats his underlings and destroys the General by breaking his arms and shoving a bomb in his mouth (this extreme measure of destruction was mitigated by the fact that he had earlier committed suicide so he could come back as a near-invincible zombie).

The easiest thing to single out in this review is to note all the similarities the film has with the aforementioned Romero zombie movies. There are even certain scenes that are exactly alike (i.e., a young survivor can't take the carnage anymore and so blows his brains out). This certainly makes the film entertaining and gore effects, though not abundant, occur often enough to leave a disturbing memory. However, it's the allusions to the sickness underlying Japanese society that truly disturbs.

Having seen the MEN BEHIND THE SUN series of films that detail the lengths the Japanese went to "study" the effects of chemical warfare on their unwilling Chinese POWs during WW2, you get the feeling Gaira is addressing those atrocities through the General Hugeloke character. Sounding a lot like Hitler (or even present-day Japanese politicians), he has the man spout an endless diatribe about how Japan will never fall to foreigners and will always remain "pure." This may be nothing more than a low budget horror film, but it's obvious the director is using the genre to air his disgust with modern Japanese society.

If, like me, you've "hungered" for a good ol' (post '68) zombie film, EMERGENCY: LIVING DEAD IN TOKYO BAY delivers true culinary satisfaction.

## HEROIC TRIO

(1992)

DIRECTED BY JOHNNY TO

REVIEWED BY ERIK SULEV

If, at the blink of an eye, I had to choose three good reasons for watching Hong Kong movies, I'd

have to pick Maggie Cheung, Anita Mui, and Michelle Yeoh. (Sure, there are other considerations, such as the outlandish action, outrageous storylines, and inspired direction found in the best from Hong Kong, but this is my review so I can pick and choose whatever three reasons I like!) . Imagine my delight when I discovered that the recent **HEROIC TRIO** stuffed three of my favorite HK actresses into one feature, as "Thief Catcher," "Wonder Woman," and "Invisible Girl," three superheroes who unite to defeat the "Master" and his subterranean army. Completely ridiculous and deliberately overdone, **HEROIC TRIO** is a refreshing change following a glut of gambling comedies, and **ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA** rip-offs. Although it's not perfect, **HEROIC TRIO** is a fast-paced, energetic comic book styled romp that deserves to be seen by a larger audience.

The film starts by introducing us to each individual member of the trio. The first is Wonder Woman (Mui) who leaps across power lines to foil yet another baby snatching that has been plaguing Hong Kong. Apparently, some invisible force has kidnapped 18 infants in the last 3 months for some unknown reason. There has never been any ransom demands or any form of communication informing the police of the kidnapper's intentions. As it turns out, the kidnappings are being done by Invisible Girl (Yeoh), who, while cloaked in her robe of invisibility is forced by the Master to deliver the babies to his underground kingdom in the sewers so that China's next King can be picked from one of them. The remaining babies will be trained as superhuman assassins, who will guide the Master and the new King toward world domination. The "how" and "why" for this are never fully explained during the film, so it's best not to worry about it too much and just sit back and enjoy the movie. If you're looking for straight answers and clear logic, you won't find it here.

We finally meet the third part of the trio when vigilante-for-hire Thief Catcher (Cheung) defuses a violent hostage situation. As Thief Catcher, Cheung is definitely playing against type as she gets a perm, wears plenty of eye-liner and some funky sun-glasses that match her black kneepads, and pecks a punch with her trusty shotgun while tearing about town in her souped-up motorcycle. It's great to see Cheung in any role, but it's especially fun to see her take on a part that you would never expect to find her in!

All three twist and tangle until they finally realize that the only way to beat the Master is with

the help and skills of each other. This unification does take some doing however since tensions between Wonder Woman and Thief Catcher still simmer following a botched attempt by Thief Catcher to single-handedly nab the baby-napper which resulted in a dead baby. As well, the question of whether Invisible Girl is either friend or foe still remains, since she has been doing the Master's dirty work by stealing the babies. In fact, much about Invisible Girl is a mystery, especially the details concerning her lover, the "Doctor", and his experiments to perfect the invisibility cloak that are now killing him. The subtitled version of Sandy Shaw's screenplay never quite puts these pieces together, and we are left to assume that the hold that the Master has over Invisible Girl has much to do with the training that she and Thief Catcher received from him as children. Thief Catcher escaped his clutches but Invisible Girl remained under the Master's control. The relationship between Invisible Girl, the Doctor and the Master is the film's weak point since it requires clarification that just isn't there. Also, any information regarding the mysterious man who trained Wonder Woman to uphold justice and banished Invisible Girl for not being good enough when they were children is also lacking. Who exactly are the enigmatic figures with their supernatural origins? Nevertheless, **HEROIC TRIO** does have enough interesting characters and events to make up for the plot holes.

Anthony Wong (the villain in **HARDBOILED** and "Sam" in **FULL CONTACT**) is almost unrecognizable as Kau, the Master's chief Assassin and guardian to the underworld. If anything, Wong deserves an award for portraying a character who loses more fingers than anyone else in motion picture history. Fans of the Shaw Brothers *lung fu* classic **THE FLYING GUILLOTINE** will probably do a double-take when they see that film's weapon make a lethal cameo appearance in the hands of Kau.

Aside from the various darts and daggers that each of the superwomen throw through the air, the poisonous needles that the Master uses are also memorable. Once imbedded in your skin, they'll slowly work their way up to your brain, driving you mad before you die, as Thief Catcher nearly finds out. All the battle scenes were directed by the film's producer Ching Siu Tung (best known for directing the **A CHINESE GHOST STORY** series), and due to his skill, even those who lack the spectacular martial arts capabilities of Michelle Yeoh, look good thanks to a few camera tricks and body doubles.

Johnny To, best known for directing several hits for Cinema City (including the Chow Yun Fat, Sylvia Chang feature *ALL ABOUT AH LONG*), does a good job with *HEROIC TRIO*, although the conclusion, with the trio battling the Master's charred skeleton with its still pulsating brain is lifted right from the *TERMINATOR* films. The film itself looks as if it were set in the 1940's with its styles and set designs, but the constant invasion of modern influences and items offsets this, creating an enjoyable and unique combination. The conclusion of the film paves the way for a sequel as the three unite in a team dubbed the "Heroic Trio", and not surprisingly, pre-production for part two has already commenced. If this means more screen time for Maggie and her knee-pads, then I'm all for it!

## TOKYO DECADENCE

(1991)

DIRECTED BY RYU MURAKAMI

REVIEWED BY JOHN CHARLES

*TOKYO DECADENCE*, the fourth film by novelist/director Ryu Murakami, follows in the footsteps of Nagasi Oshima's ground breaking *IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES* (1976) which dealt with a Japanese couple's all-consuming sexual relationship during the 1930's. Murakami's modern day story takes a different slant, revolving around the daily routine of a young prostitute named Ai and her forays into a world of affluent clients with a decided predilection for S&M and designer drugs. During a screening of *TOKYO DECADENCE* at the Toronto Festival of Festivals, at least 40 patrons went scrambling for the Exit when confronted with the unashamed excesses of Murakami's film. This more-or-less proves two things that I suspected: first, the North American movie going public still isn't ready for a frank, straight-ahead depiction of alternative sexual preferences; and secondly, your average "cineste" doesn't bother to read the Festival program guide.

Ai (Miho Nakazdo) is pretty, sad-eyed and clearly out of her element. She dutifully performs all the demeaning tasks asked of her but doesn't seem to understand what function these rituals serve. In fact, her first client has to tell her "I get pleasure out of humiliating you." The pleasure in question has him smoking coke-laced cigarettes while watching Ai stand on a high-rise window ledge in skimpy lingerie, grinding her hips for what seems like an eternity. This agonizing



session is followed by a stint on the end of a dog leash and an encounter with a motorized dildo. Throughout most of this, the man simply sits and talks on the phone discussing the day's business deals with bored detachment. Only when his wife subsequently joins in does his enthusiasm increase. Other clients get to indulge in their own kinky agenda. One drug addled nut likes to be strangled while he is jacked-off (the near-death heightening of sexual pleasure — a theme explored more vividly in *REALM*); another wants Ai to play dead so he can indulge in a little post mortem rape.

The most revealing session finds her teamed up with a gorgeous (and far more seasoned) dominatrix named Saki. Ai (and the audience) watch with horrified fascination as the trick is put through the paces. He does such a good job licking and sucking on Ai's saddle heels that Saki "rewards" him with a good whipping, a bowl full of piss (which he slurps up happily) and, finally, a little plastic sodomy courtesy of a strap-on dildo. After a long day's work, every good mistress

needs her relaxation, so the Madam invites Ai back to her apartment. Sak's recipe for a nightcap involves equal portions of coke, heroin, crack and Corona Beer.

Obviously there's more to **TOKYO DECADENCE** than just the decadence. Murakami is trying to convey the idea that Japan has become a nation of "wealth without pride." The rich are so indulgent and morally bankrupt that they submerge themselves in perversion in order to compensate for the emptiness of their lives. However, the upper classes aren't the only problem. At the film's climax, Ai escapes to the suburbs in search of love but finds that her answer does not lie there either. Her only friend in this strange macrocosm is a slightly crazy diva who lives in a world all her own.

There are a number of worthwhile ideas kicking around in Murakami's screenplay, if there is a problem here, it's one of audience orientation. Films like **TOKYO DECADENCE**, **IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES** and Barbet Schroder's **MAITRESSE** (1975) offer the viewer strong depictions of unusual sexual practices that haven't appeared in North American mainstream cinema (and probably never will). Consequently, unless the viewer has seen similar textures or hardcore S&M porn, many of the subtler themes explored in these films may be washed away by the tidal wave of perverse sexual material (though it's interesting to note that Murakami's film respects Japanese law forbidding full frontal nudity). Repeat viewings are not only recommended, they are essential.

**TOKYO DECADENCE** makes for fascinating viewing. While some of the sexual kinks on display are truly repulsive, the presentation is so attractive (beautiful women, lush cinematography, music by Ryuichi Sakamoto) that you can't take your eyes off the screen (though evidently this observation is not universal). Tadashi Aoki's camera takes everything in with a cool, detached eye that gives the proceedings a decidedly voyeuristic feel. As Noah Cowan observed in the Festival guidebook, "S&M and mainlining have never looked sexier." The ugly, horrifying depictions of heroin addiction on display in **SID & NANCY** (1986) and **H** (1990), are nowhere to be found here. One can't help but admire Sak's hedonistic outlook; she's more than willing to take the pleasures life offers without a single regret. Her time on earth will, without a doubt, be very short, but she's going to enjoy every minute of it. Let's see an American director try to sneak that philosophy past the MPAA.

## KILLER CONSTABLE aka KARATE EXTERMINATORS

(1973)

DIRECTED BY KUEI CHIH-HUNG

REVIEWED BY DAVID CHUTE

**KILLER CONSTABLE** is an unusually grim, almost nihilistic sword film with detective story elements, comparable only to Patrick Tam's **THE SWORD** in its resemblance to twisted samurai sagas like **SWORD OF DOOM**. (This generously pure Chinese swordplay picture even has a Japanese fight choreographer.)

Chen Kuan-tai is the dour Constable Leung, a Manchu law enforcement officer known for his bloody ruthlessness. He routinely tortures suspects to obtain confessions, and he usually ends up killing the men he stalks. Near the opening, Leung's long-time partner and best friend drops him in disgust because of his harsh habits. Leung's ambiguous status as a Manchu oppressor of the indigent Ha populace is stressed.

Assigned by Commissioner Liu (Ku Feng), a Judge Dee figure, to track down a gang of thieves who have stolen millions of taels of gold from the Imperial Treasury, Leung cuts a bloody swath through Ching dynasty China. The best action scenes occur at night. An amazing sword battle in sucking knee-deep mud, and an otherworldly siege sequence punctuated with flights of fire snows.

At one point Leung is sheltered, and has his wounds tenderly bathed by the blind daughter of a bandit leader. The two old adversaries recognize each other instantly, but they keep the news from the girl so they can sneak away to settle things quietly, with an orderly duel to the death. In its depth of feeling, and its savagery, the sequence recalls one of the strongest episodes of Sam Peckinpah's **PAT GARRETT AND BILLY THE KID**.

**KILLER CONSTABLE** actually goes a few steps further than its American counterparts. It doesn't try to palm off its brutal protagonist as a wish fulfillment fantasy figure. The toughest cop of them all, in this account, is also the most predictable and thus the easiest to manipulate.

It emerges that Commissioner Liu staged the initial gold robbery himself, to cover his own embezzlement of state funds—and that he assigned "Killer Leung" to the case to make sure that no pesky witnesses will be left alive. Even the partner who deserted Leung at the outset, supposedly for lofty moral reasons, has been in



cohoos with the master manipulator all along. There's a wild final battle sequence (with music lifted from the soundtrack of the 1933 KING KONG) in which everybody dies.

This is an important specimen of one of Hong Kong's favorite genres, currently making a comeback in razzle dazzle pictures like *SWORDSMAN* and *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA*. None of the new attempts has the impact of *KILLER CONSTABLE*.



*Michelle Yeoh (aka Michelle Khan)*

## BUTTERFLY & SWORD

(1993)

STARRING JOEY WANG/MICHELLE YEOH  
REVIEWED BY RICHARD AKIYAMA

Just when you think Hong Kong Action cinema has devised every possible way to stage a swordfight or taken theatrical martial arts to the zenith of outrageousness, along comes a film like *BUTTERFLY AND SWORD* which makes past efforts seem almost meaningless. Although it suffers stretches of mundane storytelling, the movie enthusiastically revels in its spectacular action sequences, generating the kind of wildly imaginative wonder that makes you rub your eyes red in astonishment.

Michelle Yeoh (*THE HEROIC TRIO*) heads up a strong cast as the fiercely determined leader of a gang of martial artists. Named Ko, Yeoh's character follows the orders of the Emperor's deathly ill eunuch, who wants to avert a takeover of the world of martial arts by the evil kung fu master Sun Yuk Pa. Suen has allied himself with a powerful government official named Li Shu Tin; their plan to rebel against his majesty is detailed in a secret letter sent from Li to Suen. The eunuch hires Ko to recover the letter from Suen's possession so that the deadly duo's dastardly plan can be exposed. Yip Cheung (Donnie Yen), an expert swordsman in Ko's gang, launches a

first strike against Suen, but the resulting battle achieves little save for some gory carnage. Ko's favorite underling, childhood friend Sing (Tony Leung), goes deep undercover and manages to secure a position as one of Suen's bodyguards. Suen's hooker companion catches Sing's eye when he recognizes her to be a childhood companion who had disappeared without a trace ten years ago. Suen mistakes Sing's interest in his woman to be a sign of love and sets up a marriage date for the couple. The hooker is forced to expose her true identity to Suen and is eventually slain; with her last breath she reveals to Sing that she had been working as an undercover agent for Ko. Sing later confronts Ko and accuses her of heartlessly sacrificing lives for ambition. A teary-eyed Ko argues that Sing misunderstands her motives, but she agrees to set him free at the completion of his current mission.

For all of her convoluted plot maneuvers, Ko finally retrieves the letter by simply launching an all out attack on Suen's stronghold. The resulting struggle provides some amazing footage, not the least being a human bow-and-arrow, with Ko wrapping her purple sash around her upraised leg and propelling Sing through the air like a guided missile so that he can blast through the body of his shocked opponent. *BUTTERFLY AND SWORD*'s expertly filmed action sequences offer a startling combination of grace and savagery—often in the very same shot. One of the most incredible scenes occurs during an ambush in a bamboo forest. Ko splits apart a bamboo stalk by spreading her legs and effortlessly floating down the middle of the two halves. Each half of the bamboo stem impales a luckless onrushing attacker through the chest. By the end of this remarkable sequence, there's a literal graveyard of warriors left gruesomely dangling in midair with chest-piercing bamboo stalks propping up their lifeless bodies.

Amid all the destruction, the movie does manage to elicit some time for quiet moments. Romance blossoms between Sing and a simple woman named Butterfly (Joey Wang), who wants nothing to do with the world of martial arts. Sing hides his true occupation from her and pretends to be a common merchant who knows no kung fu. Meanwhile, Yip Cheung is in love with Ko but is unwilling to express his affection for her because he thinks she's in love with Sing. As a matter of fact, she is, and she jealously refuses to accept the fact that Sing's heart belongs to Butterfly. The love triangles don't exactly generate much dramatic tension, but they do allow the

performers room to flex their acting muscles. Donnie Yen (*DRAGON INN*) reveals an uncharacteristically soft side to his screen persona as the love-stricken swordsman who drowns his sorrows in drink while Tony Leung has already proven his mettle in undercover roles (see *HARDBOILED*). However, the most impressive performance comes from Michelle Yeeh (aka Michelle Khan), who's completely believable be it as the victim of unrequited love or as the fierce warrior clad in a flowing robe who casually slaughters her enemies.

## CITY HUNTER

(1993)

DIRECTED BY WONG CHING

REVIEWED BY ERIK SULEV

Either you'll really enjoy this film, or you'll hate it, and it all depends upon your tolerance for Jackie Chan's goofy humor at its most extreme. Director Wong Ching, who has had some very huge hits with Hong Kong megastar Stephen Chiu Sing Chi, *CITY HUNTER* embodies the same irrelevant style of ridiculous humor that's found in Chiu's films such as *ROYAL TRAMP* and *FIGHT BACK TO SCHOOL* series. An observant friend of mine (thanks Stephen) made the valid point that with *CITY HUNTER*, Chan is trying to regain some of his audience that he lost to Chiu, by doing what is essentially a Stephen Chiu Sing Chi film, and the choice of Wong as director strongly supports the idea. Wong is not one of my favorite Hong Kong directors, but he knows the results he's aiming for and he knows how to do them well. Wong has stated that he doesn't base the success of his films on artistic merit, but rather on their box office profit. This doesn't always discern the art from the trash, but to Wong Ching it really doesn't matter. How does *CITY HUNTER* fare? Well, it's trash, but it's a helluva lot of fun trash, and if you're going to spend your time watching trash, then you can't do any better than this!

The first group of people to moan about *CITY HUNTER* were the die-hard kung fu buffs who still complain that no current Hong Kong action film can compare to those 1970's Shaw Brothers' classics. Sure, *CITY HUNTER* is no Shaw Brothers presentation (and it's not even in Shewscope!), but why should it be? Times and tastes change, and it's obvious that the audience Chan and Wong were aiming for is not the same one from 20 years ago. Aimed at the youth

market, *CITY HUNTER* acts its age accordingly, reflecting current interests and fads, and if you don't get it, then Chan and Wong, quite frankly, don't give a damn.

The next group to criticize were the fanatical followers of the Japanese comic book and anime version of *CITY HUNTER*, who felt that this live action variation was nothing like the *CITY HUNTER* they were familiar with. Complaints like this are always a waste of time, whether it be comparing the *BATMAN* films to the comic book versions, and likewise with the *X-MEN* Saturday morning cartoon show. What's next? Shrieks of horror that the *REN AND STIMPY* comic captures none of the wit or imagination of the TV show? If you want the original, stick with it, because versions of your favorite character(s) done in different mediums are always bound to disappoint. Besides, aren't there better things to worry about?

As Ryu Seabe, a private investigator, Jackie and his assistant Kaori (Joey Wang) are given the task of finding the runaway daughter of a rich industrialist. The trail leads to an exclusive cruise aboard a luxurious liner which becomes the target of a group of armed robbers and their charismatic leader (played by Richard Norton, a familiar face in Hong Kong action films). The rest of the film ends up pretty much like *DIE HARD* on a boat, as Ryu, Kaori and the industrialist's daughter, along with a handful of others square off against the armed criminals. Among the other players are Leon Lai in an enjoyable cameo as a God of Gamblers-type, and Chingmy Yau (seen recently in *THE NAKED KILLER*) as Seeko, a buxom government agent, who with her equally endowed partner bare the brunt of the low-brow humor about their body-parts. In one instance their breasts turn to hamburgers as a starving Ryu fantasizes about food.

By far, the most outrageous sequence is the "Streetfighter II" one, where Ryu is tossed on top of the videogame and after being surrounded by wires and electrical current, he transforms into the various characters of the game (E. Honda, Gille, Dhalim and even Chun Lee!) and assumes all their trademark actions and sound effects! When I saw this in a Chinatown theater, the crowd went absolutely wild, cheering on every transformation, while I had to explain the joke to my Uncle, who although a fervent Jackie Chan follower, had no idea what "Streetfighter II" was. If stuff like this doesn't excite you, then you'd best stay away, because the film is filled with similar nonsense and sight gags, complete with Jackie hamming it up for all it's worth.



## ANGEL THE KICKBOXER

(1992)

DIRECTED BY GODFREY HO

REVIEWED BY RICHARD AKIYAMA

Take a mediocre Cynthia Rothrock movie released in the states as **HONOR AND GLORY**, shoot some new footage starring Yukari Oshima for the Asian market, mix it all together and you get a ludicrous new thriller that's only slightly more palatable. Unsuspecting viewers may think they've stumbled onto the initial teaming of Rothrock and Oshima, but it's obvious that the two stars never came within kicking distance of each other.

The financial collapse of a bank in Hong Kong is linked to a Washington tycoon named Snel (looking like a musclebound Morton Downey Jr.), who is suspected of using his position as the bank's Chairman of the Board to steal "thousand millions" of that institution's funds. Rothrock's FBI agent is recalled from Hong Kong back to Washington to investigate the possibility that the perpetually scowling Snel may be involved in a deal to purchase a stolen Russian missile. Rothrock teams up with her martial arts trained reporter sister and their CIA employed father to stop the potentially catastrophic transaction from occurring. Meanwhile in the Hong Kong based plot, three of the collapsed bank's executive officers (led by Waise Lee) swindle Snel out of \$50 million that they were supposed to deposit in his Swiss bank account. In response, Snel sends a Japanese hitman to Hong Kong to deal with the trio. Hong Kong cop Oshima and her CIA boyfriend (**BLACK CAT 2**'s Robin Shou) get word of the Japanese killer's entry into the country and work together to stop him.

Director Godfrey Ho (**LETHAL PANTHER**) displays a severe lack of interest in the proceedings with his static direction and poor handling of the actors. The movie does deliver a number martial arts sequences, but these are worth seeing only for the athleticism of the performers rather than the mostly uninspired fight choreography. Rothrock completists may be inclined to track down the original English dubbed American video release, but all other prospective viewers are advised to stick with the HK version, which not only offers the additional Yukari Oshima footage, but also provides an extra fight climax.

A valid criticism is that none of Jackie's stunts in the film rank up there with some of his standout efforts in the past. A mammoth skateboard chase turns out to be more send-up than sensational, and Chan's climatic battle with Norton is a little bit too much of nothing special, giving us the impression that Chan is deliberately taking it easy in preparation for the anticipated **CRIME STORY** and **DRUNKEN MASTER 2**. Also, the film is a little too episodic (although a "cameo" by Bruce Lee is clever), but that in itself is a usual failing of Wong Ching's directorial style in all of his films. As well, there's a long dance number that's really out of place (but fun to watch), and two annoying short and chubby comedians who some will wish were out of the picture.

For what it's worth, **CITY HUNTER** is a fun throwaway picture that won't tax your mind, and if you're in the mood, can be an entertaining time-waster. Besides, Jackie Chan is Jackie Chan, and if you're a fan you'll probably find something in **CITY HUNTER** that you'll like. If you accept the film for what it is, and don't demand from it what it clearly isn't, you'll have a good time. Some things were never meant to be taken seriously, and Chan knows that **CITY HUNTER** is just that. So should you. Relax, see it, have fun, then forget about it. That's what a disposable product is all about.

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# SHIRYO NO WANA 2: EVIL DEAD TRAP 2

by Thomas Weisser

A note on the original Japanese title *Shiryo No Wana*.  
A literal translation would be *Formation Of The Dead Ghost*.  
Various publications, including this one, have called it *Evil Dead Trap*.  
Ironically the literal translation better describes the sequel,  
but for the sake of unity and clarity  
we will continue to call the series *Evil Dead Trap*.

*"Is this what you wanted?  
Is it over now?"*

*See how violence and sex merge  
at the same point?"*

Those words are shouted during a brutal girl-fight at the conclusion of *Evil Dead Trap 2*. Ami Kagayama screams these prophetic words at Aki Gotani moments before plunging a knife deep into the girl's back. And consider this: a few scarce seconds early, Ami's left arm was disjointed and savagely hacked off.

Both opponents are coated in blood; gore is flowing freely. In fact, what's this? the heroine is reaching inside the gaping wound of a freshly slaughtered body. She's pulling out intestines and assorted entrails!

The conclusion of this film is a savage cinematic spectacle reminiscent of Dario Argento's *Phenomenon* with a sly nod to *Inferno*. It's amazing. Astonishing. But oddly bewildering.

It's especially bewildering because, upon first glance, *Evil Dead Trap 2* seems to make no sense at all. That is, upon first glance. But after close scrutiny (put up the *Do Not Disturb* sign while watching this one) not only does it make sense, but it takes us where few films have the guts to go.

The first *Evil Dead Trap* was an extraordinary example of contemporary Japanese horror. While the obvious structure of the film closely resembled Western slasher flicks, the real plot drifted into uncharted territory. I mean, by God! when was the last time you saw a man actually give birth to his split personality? It certainly was a unique and unconventional concept! But the filmmaking style and likable characters made the oblique ending palatable.

*Evil Dead Trap 2* tells the story of Aki (Yuko Nakagawa), an unattractive, over-weight girl who "lives a hermit existence" as a projectionist in a neighborhood cinema. She passes her time by killing prostitutes, butchering them and cutting their stomachs out. Incidentally, these vicious murders are depicted in disturbingly graphic detail, including one excruciating segment involving a victim who refuses to die. Intestines dangle obscenely from the girl's mutilated genitals while she systematically tries to escape and fight back, both at the same time. But finally her body betrays her, and she throws herself into a convulsing, violent death on the pavement of a wet Tokyo alley.

Eventually, Aki finds herself involved in a deadly love/hate relationship with her beautiful friend Ami (Rie Kondou), a former pop singer turned TV news-reporter. The conflict between these two girls is heightened by the sexual aggressions of a mutual boyfriend named Kurashiki (Shirou Sano). In short, he fucks them both. Ami gets pregnant; Aki gets jealous. This is the catalyst for the film's blood-bath finale.

Meanwhile, Aki is tormented by the frequent manifestation of a freaky-looking child named Hideki (is he real? or the ghost from a past abortion? Who knows?) Since she's the only one who ever sees Hideki, her boss suggests that she get psychiatric help from a lady-spiritualist named Kannazuki. But the holy woman freaks out and tries to kill Aki, screaming: "An evil power surrounds and protects you!" This, of course, is true. True, but also unfortunate for the spiritualist.

However, don't be confused. All this is only window dressing. It's the mustard on the hamburger. Did I mention the film is really about a girl and her descent into madness? I believe, it's a contemporary version of Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*. With a very important difference.

In fact, the thing which separates this motion picture from most other films is its "point of view." This movie is told as a first-person narrative, a technique virtually unused in cinema art.

David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* employed a similar style. In the Lynch film, we follow the story as seen and told by Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan). We, as members of the audience, only know what he knows; our observations are based exclusively upon his observations. The only knowledge we have of any characters or situations are discovered entirely through him. This forces us to ask the question: "Does he have access to all the pertinent information?" And the multi-levels of the film's interpretation are based on the answer to that question.

Allow me to step back for a moment and explain what the hell I'm talking about. Okay?

In literature, the "first person narrative" is used quite often and effectively. The author talks to you as if he were telling a story. He is the central character. The technique is used by many mystery writers because it allows them to reveal "clues" in an orderly fashion. It also allows certain clues to remain hidden until the opportune, climatic moment. Simply, the reader only knows what the narrator tells him.

Since the film is a visual medium, a true first-person narrative is quite difficult to achieve. Obviously, the audience has instant access to all visible characters. David Lynch handled it by having the camera exclusively follow Jeffrey Beaumont throughout the film, thus-- we only know what he knows.

In *Evil Dead Trap 2*, director Isou Hashimoto creates a different type of first-person narrative. We see the entire film through the eyes of the lead character. Or more precisely, we see the world as Aki Otani sees it. In her fantasy world, Aki's friends marvel over her "fantastic job as a movie projectionist" while they discount their own jobs (sales manager, television news reporter, theatre owner, etc.). In fact they take every opportunity to make fun of each other: "Ami thinks she's so cool! She still thinks she's a star." But not once does any character in the film poke fun at Aki.

And how easy it would be!

Aki is grossly over-weight, genuinely dull, and uniformly dykish. But in her world, she is the center of attraction. When she goes to a party, men vie for her attention and they argue over who will drive her home. When she goes bar-hopping dressed like a slut (not a pretty sight!), men fight for the chance to rape her.

At one point, she is even complimented for not wearing perfume: "You have a natural sweet scent."

In her demented world, she is being stalked by a child. It's probably the "ghost" of the baby she aborted years before. His name is Hideki. This ghost-child gives her instructions to kill prostitutes and remove their stomachs, presumably so they can never conceive. As her madness progresses, she allows Hideki to take over everything and everyone in her world. Her best friend, Amy, announces that she's pregnant: "The baby is growing in my stomach. His name is Hideki." And boyfriend Kurashiki turns out to be a married man with a wife and child. His child is also Hideki. And, without giving away the ending, everything comes full circle when Hideki makes his presence known in an unconventional fashion.

Similar to the first *Evil Dead Trap*, producer/writer Seishu Ikeda (director of #1) is concerned with split-personalities and their unified quest. In this instance, as the film progresses, Aki and Ami become dual personalities. "I understand you," Ami says, "We both tried to do the same thing. You tried it through violence and destruction. I did it through sex. The result is growing in my stomach."

Moments later, when Aki finds a mutilated body in Ami's bathtub, she realizes that her alter-ego has become too powerful. Not only does Ami have Hideki in her belly but through him she's learning about the joys of killing, too. If she doesn't act fast -- Aki fears -- there will be nothing left of herself. Thus, similar to the battle of the split-personalities in *Evil Dead Trap* (1), here we have the final conflict between two merging characters who are fighting for control of a fantasy world, with Hideki as the precarious prize.

The film is a good looking project with some of the best night-photography imaginable, especially the murder sequences shot against screaming Tokyo billboards. These scenes are drenched in garish reds and yellows, underlining a distinct futuristic look. The two lead actresses, Youko Nakagima and Rie Kondou, are exceptional in very complex, difficult roles.

As I mentioned earlier, it's amazing. Astonishing. And bewildering. Certainly, this is an uncompromising film that demands much from its audience. *Evil Dead Trap 2* is not afraid to take enormous risks. It is an intelligent, well-written (don't forget, gross-out) horror film. For adults. That, alone, makes it very exceptional.



## The Translated Baby Cart Series: **SWORD OF VENGEANCE**

by Max Allan Collins

Part one of two

Since its release in 1981, *Shogun Assassin* has attracted a large cult following; in fact, cult is probably not the word, as a surprising number of mainstream fans (and critics) are enthralled by the film's "stunning visual ballet of violence and bloodletting" (as Leonard Maltin put it).

But fans of action (and gore) movies were intrigued, even maddened, by the knowledge that the film was pieced together from two films in the six-part Japanese *Sword Of Vengeance* series, nicknamed *The Baby Cart* movies, in reference

to the rumbling, wooden baby buggy in which the protagonist, a wandering samurai, carts around his three-year-old son.

A few of *Shogun Assassin*'s fans recalled an earlier import, *Lightning Swords Of Death*, released in the United States in 1974, taken from another in the *Baby Cart* series. The surprise success of *Shogun Assassin* brought *Lightning Swords* out of storage for airing on Orionmax and other cable outlets. In 1988, the dubbed film was released on video tape by JA Video Productions

as *Lupine Wolf*, apparently the British title. The box art describes the film as *Lone Wolf With Cub: Episode of Baby Cart To Hades*.

*Lightning Swords of Death*, despite its lackluster dubbing, further tantalized fans of the earlier compilation film. It seemed a purer translation, without the addition of voiceover narration by the child, or the glitzy musical score of Mark Lindsay (erstwhile lead singer of Paul Revere and the Raiders!). The latter elements had made *Shogun Assassin* accessible to a wider audience, and on its own terms, the patched-together film was an admirable.

But astute film fans knew *Lightning Swords of Death* was a better indication of the superior source material for both films. What many fans of *Shogun Assassin* and *Lightning Swords of Death* either did not know—or understand—was the original source material for the Japanese films themselves: *Kozure Okami*, a comic book.

In Japan, *manga* (irresponsible drawings) are a widely read form of entertainment completely lacking the "kids stuff" stigma of American comics. (This is reflected by the on-slaught of adult animation that has in recent years found its way to America, particularly through collector's sources—*Akira*, *UruseiYakushi*, and *Galgo 13* are just a few examples.) *Kozure Okami* (*Wolf And*

*Child*) is an example of *gekiga*, a dramatic picture story form of manga. Always described as an epic, the sprawling saga of wandering samurai Ito Ogami and his small son Daigoro has been described as spanning 2000, 7000 or even 9000 pages.

What is indisputable, however, is the popularity of the series: in its various forms, *Lone Wolf And Cub* (the feature's most common Americanized name, although *Lone Wolf With Child* is a more correct translation) has sold 250 million copies. Published as a serial from 1970 through 1976 in the weekly adult manga *Action*, *Kozure Okami* became a household word in Japan. From the comic-book source have been derived stage plays, hit records, a TV series—and the six-part *Sword Of Vengeance* cinematic saga starring the late Tomisaburo Wakayama as Ito Ogami and Akihiro Tomikawa as Daigoro.

The author of *Kozure Okami* is Kazuo Koike, one of Japan's most successful writers and a widely acknowledged master of *Gekiga*. One of the writers of the popular, long-running *Galgo 13*, he is the founder of *Gekiga-Senjuku*, a school for writers and artists as difficult to gain entry into as a top university, and Studiochip Inc., which produces and publishes his own work as well as that of other top Japanese comics creators.

Koike's artistic collaborator is Goseki Kojima, whose cinematic style of comics storytelling in *Kozure Okami* was both innovative and influential; he was continued to collaborate with Koike, primarily on other samurai tales.



Unfortunately, none of the team's other work has been translated for American consumption; however, another of writer Koike's creations *Crying Freeman*, is published in America by Viz Comics.

A number of American comics fans -- some of them spurred by *Lightning Swords* and *Shogun Asaseen* -- sought out the original Japanese-language comic books, which were kept in print in various editions, notably a set of fourteen two-inch thick volumes. In the late '70s, untranslated manga had begun turning up for sale at comics conventions -- at San Diego and other California cons -- due to the larger Japanese population of that area. The interest of comics fans was fueled by Frederik L. Schodt's hardcover book, *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*, which provided not only an overview of its subject but extended examples.

*Manga! Manga!* did not include an extended sample of Kozure Okami, although several panels and a full-page samurai fight scene were presented, and the feature's popularity and significance in the field were discussed, further tantalizing American comics fans where the feature was concerned.

The untranslated Kozure Okami seemed accessible to comics fan, because Koike and Kojima kept their storytelling as understated as it was vivid. Violent samurai duels -- and sequences similar to those in *Shogun Asaseen* and *Lightning Swords of Death*, in which Lone Wolf stood against a horde of sword-wielding attackers -- would do on for dozens of dialogue-free pages; the flesh-rendering sound effects -- in violent-looking Japanese lettering -- needed no translation.

Similarly, through various sources, untranslated video tapes of the six *Swords Of Vengeance* episodes began circulating; and film fans -- like comics buffs -- felt they could follow the action fairly well, as those too were sparsely told, with long sequences that were silent but for bone-crunching, blood-splashing sound effects. After all, Ito Gami was a man of few words. And his cold-eyed toddler, Daigoro, rarely said anything.

In recent years, two largely unheralded but significant pop-cultural events proved wrong the assumptions of both comics fans and film buffs. Translated versions of the graphic novel Kozure Okami and the epic film saga *Swords Of Vengeance* have appeared, revealing these works to have weight and resonance even their most ardent American fan could never have imagined. The culture shock of these Zan melodramas is capable of sending even the most

jaded fan reeling with surprises of character and event.

The now-defunct First Comics -- in the midst of publishing some of the hipper super-hero and SF comic books of the late '70s and '80s -- began publishing its projected 110 issue translation of Kozure Okami in 1988. The project -- under the title *Lone Wolf And Cub* -- made quite a splash; the first twelve issues featured striking covers and informative introductions by Frank Miller, at the time the hottest comics creator in the field. Miller had come off his enormously successful Batman graphic novel, *Dark Knight*, to present a less successful Kozure Okami-inspired work entitled *Ronin*. Admirably, Miller was repaying a debt by introducing American fans to his source material.

These issues sold well -- particularly issue one -- but when Miller left, and the introductions ceased, and other "hot" cover artists came aboard, sales dwindled. First Comics was a company beset by many problems, none of which are pertinent to this discussion; but their thin reprint issue, with a relatively high cover price (\$3.25), and increasingly sporadic publication, may have caused reader interest to lag.

By 1991 and issue 45 (not 48, as some "price guides" indicate), *Lone Wolf and Cub* was dead; because of unkept financial promises to Koike and Kojima, further English translations in America are, at present time, doubtful. Poor sales, in America, and dishonorable treatment in Japan, may doom the series to never be completed in English.

That's tragic. Koike and Kojima have, in Kozure Okami, created a comics classic equal to the work of such American comics geniuses as Harvey Kurtzman, Johnny Craig, Will Eisner, and Milton Caniff. The 45 issues of *Lone Wolf and Cub* are essential reading for fans of the Baby Cart movies; the translations, by David and Oba Lewis and Alex Wald, are both deft and poetic. The stories are everybit as explicit as the films, where sex and violence are concerned, and even more complex in their characterizations and in their exploration of bushido (the way of the warrior) and Buddhist philosophy.

The *Sword of Vengeance* film series may be a somewhat simplified version of Kozure Okami, but it is also one of the most faithful, adult comics-to-film adaptations ever realized. The obvious reason for the artistic integrity of this transfer is the screenwriter of all six movies: Kazuo Koike himself.

Further, Goseki Kojima is said to have joined with his collaborator in maintaining artistic control



over the visuals of the films, and the six movies do draw upon Kojima's comics as their virtual storyboards, just as they all, to one degree or another, adapt Koike's original comic scripts.

While the translation of the original comic-book series in English came to a halt short of half-way, *Video Search of Miami*—in its ongoing efforts to subtitle key foreign genre films otherwise inaccessible to English-speaking fans—recently completed first-rate translations of all six *Baby Cart* movies in letter-boxed format.

This ambitious, important project reveals the *Sword Of Vengeance* films to be as good in their medium as *Kozure Oigami* is in the comics medium. The early '70s films—influenced by the then-current Spaghetti Westerns, particularly those of Sergio Leone—are of unfailingly high quality, every one worthy of a four-star (\*\*\*\*) rating; as a whole, they probably constitute the best, most consistently superior film series of all time, in any genre, from any country.

VSoM's Amy Asai and Tom Welser have provided a translation as deft and often as poetic as that of the Lewis/Wald team at First Comics. Their natural, colloquial translations make these entertaining, but sometimes difficult movies, extremely user friendly.

While a few difference in plot separate the comics and the movies, the basic story is the same.

Ito Oigami is the decapitator (*Kaishakunin*) for the shogunate—specifically, after the condemned has committed ritual suicide (*seppuku*, or more vulgarly, *harakiri*), the *Kaishakunin* beheads the condemned, completing the ritual. The *Kaishakunin* must also be a martial artist of the highest skill, as he will at times be called upon to represent the Shogun in an official duel. This position assures Oigami's family an honored place among an honored class, and a cushy life style in a poverty-stricken land.

Incidentally, at least one source indicates that "Ito Oigami" is not a name, but a title, meaning "scared sword."

The envious Yagyuu clan (spelled Yagyu in the graphic novel) frames Oigami, making him look disloyal to the shogun; his wife is killed, though their infant son, Daigoro, survives. Giving the child a choice between a colorful ball and a shiny sword, tiny Daigoro's samurai instincts kick in, and his little hand touches the blade, saving him—and his father—from the ritual death the parent would have inflicted on both himself and his beloved boy.

This is not a happy moment: the father knows that the child would be better off in heaven with his mother, rather than on the road to hell with his father.

Sentences of *seppuku*, Oigami laughs in the Yagyuu's face, clutching his child as he flees his home sword-in-hand, cluttering the landscape with maimed and slain Yagyuu clansmen. His journey to *Mufumedo* (the dark realm of hell) has begun. Henceforth, he will be an assassin for his standard fee of 500 gold coins.



Oigami has been wrongly described as a "fugitive samurai." Not at all. He wanders to build his strength, his spirit, his skills, and, for that matter, his pocketbook. He is also striking back indirectly (sometimes not so indirectly) at the Yagyuu clan, knowing that most of the trouble being caused is their work. So almost any assassination assignment he undertakes will undermine the efforts of the Yagyuu, who are (in the comic books, at least) themselves secretly planning to overthrow the Shogunate.

A difference between the films and the comics is the central bad guy, the white-haired, white-bearded leader of the Yagyuu clan, Lord Retsudo Yagyuu. In the films, the elder is described as the "shogun." In the comic books, he is the head of a powerful rival clan. In the comic books, Retsudo Yagyuu is a formidable figure, easily the equal of Ito Oigami in the martial

arts, and a villain of Fu Manchu-like proportions. In one of the few weaknesses of the *Sword Of Vengeance* film series, Shogun Yagyu is portrayed (especially in the first film) as a weasel, even a coward, sheltered by his loyal soldiers and family. A change in actors helps, but does not remedy this situation, with the most accurate portrayal of the manga Retsudo Yagyu coming in *Baby Cart #4: Heart Of A Parant*.

A minor difference deals with Daigoro himself: in the films, the child had already been born at the time of the mother's death; in the comics, the infant's birth was via inadvertent Caesarian birth by his mother's assassins!

The film version, while less explosive, allows for a tender and yet chilling scene between Ito Ogami and his wife (in *Baby Cart #1: Land A Child...Land An Arm*): their mutual love for the child is obvious, as Ogami explains the meaning of the boy's name (Daigoro is "strong enough to live in Heaven or Hell") in the shadow of the mother's expressed fears: she has been having nightmares about those people her husband has executed, visions of a lake of blood....

For those familiar with the comic books, the initial reaction to actor Tomisaburo Wakayama might be negative: in the manga, Ito Ogami is a tall, even towering figure. By comparison, Wakayama is a fireplug. They seem to have sent Eli Wallach to do Lee Van Cleef's job.

This impression rapidly fades: Wakayama's stoic and yet expressive manner, his deep grunt of a voice, his ballet-like movements in battle, and most of all his restrained but utterly loving attitude toward his son, make the actor the perfect Ito Ogami. Facially, he greatly resembles Kojima's drawings, particularly the heavy eyebrows, and the strands of hair that fly free in combat, like strokes of Kojima's pen.

Child actor Akhiro Tomikawa is just as good as Daigoro; only in the final *Baby Cart #6: Daigoro! We're Going Into Hell!* does he seem to be acting at all, doing occasional cute, wide-eyed takes at the director's behest. By the way, Daigoro's strange (by western standards) haircut is the standard one of the samurai class; it's interesting that the samurai father chooses not to maintain this traditional tonsure, allowing his hair to grow long and even wild.

It's been fashionable to dismiss the violence in these films as "cartoony" and while the films do reflect the violent "cartoons" that spawned them, that violence --however blackly (and redly) humorous the spouting, spraying bloodshed may be-- is almost always emotionally wrenching. Life

seems cheap in the mid-1600s during the Tokugama period of Japan's history: some poor hapless individual is always volunteering to his master to find out if this wandering samurai is really Long Wolf, sacrificing his life in the process.

But Ito Ogami professes to "love" his life, and he regularly prays for the souls of those he's dispatched. The poignance of the series is watching the solemn Ogami interact with his child. Between the bouts of carnage, Ogami must be both father and mother to the child - tending to the boy's toilet training, his lessons, his etiquette, his religious upbringing. It is this understated tenderness --and not necessarily the over-the-top gore-- that makes these films so richly rewarding.

The journey of Daigoro is even more interesting than Ogami's - the wide-eyed child becomes hardened to violence, becoming a virtual zombie in the face of it by the later entries, but a constant motif in the films is Daigoro's mute yet alert observations of nature, of weather, and of man. Daigoro is enthralled by birds and snails, shapes in the snow that might be monsters fire his imagination; he is charmed by clowns and the simple sight of peasants in their daily life. All of the films pay as much attention to the beauties of the outdoors, and the day-to-day doings of people, as to action and bloodshed.

The six films --four of which were directed by Kenji Misumi-- have a remarkable unity of theme and style, even while managing to be distinct and easily distinguishable from each other. The latter is particularly impressive considering the episodic nature of each film; the comic book stories are truly episodes, and scripter Koike has seamlessly stitched together two or three or even four episodes from his comic-book series into the individual entries in *Swords Of Vengeance*.

In the next issue of ATC, author Collins explores each of the six "Baby Cart" movies in depth.



Tsui Hark (R) with actor Jacky Cheung at press conference for *Wicked City*

## What's Tsui Hark Been Doing Lately? **DRAGON INN/WICKED CITY**

an indepth critique by TRAVIS CRAWFORD

While the distinctly Chinese themes and historical content of his films may prevent him from gaining the Western mainstream success associated with his former collaborator John Woo, producer/director Tsui Hark is still one of the best "popular" (i.e., non-arthouse audience) filmmakers working in the world today. Whether through his directing work or — more frequently as of late — his Corman-like role as producer/Svengali to a handful of other Hong Kong directors creating films for Hark's Film Workshop production company, this Texas-educated auteur of flamboyant visuals and lightning-fast pacing is able to deliver increasingly astonishing genre films at a highly prolific rate and — more importantly — a strong consistency of quality. After his diamally misguided American-shot film *THE MASTER* was unearthed recently (it had been shelved for two years), one might begin to wonder if Hark's talents had begun to flounder. Worry not — Hark's two new 1992 productions, *DRAGON INN* and *THE WICKED CITY*, show him to be in top form, not to mention highly versatile in choice of subject matter and stylistic approach.

*DRAGON INN* is the more "typical," or at least instantly recognizable Hark production of the two, a period adventure/romance film that sits comfortably beside the *SWORDSMAN*, *A CHINESE GHOST STORY*, and *ONCE UPON A*

*TIME IN CHINA* series among his filmography (given the visual similarities, it is worth noting that *GHOST STORY* director Ching Siu Tung served as production supervisor on this film). Director Raymond Lee manages to keep the overplotted storyline coherent throughout the film's breakneck 88 minutes, a tribute to both his gifts as a director and to his excellent cast. Given the plot, it's a miracle the movie never succumbs to *SWORDSMAN*-styled incoherence.

During the King Tai era of the Ming government, the numerous eunuch courts hold much of the country's power. The strongest of these, the East Chamber, is led by eunuch Tsao Shu Yan, who orders the wrongful executions of those who protest his power, using his court to unjustly frame them. As the film opens, two innocent children imprisoned by the East Chamber are rescued by Imperial swordsman Chow Wei-On (Tony Leung) and his companion Yau Mo-Yan (Lin Ching Hsi), accompanied by several of Wei-On's paid swordsmen. Wei-On and Mo-Yan whisk the youths away, with the eunuch's soldiers in close pursuit. The paths of the two opposing factions cross at the Dragon Inn, the lone shelter for travelers amid an unending stretch of barren desert. The inn is run by Jade King (Goddess-like Maggie Cheung steals the film), a self-absorbed, apolitical swindler ("thieves watching out for thieves," she terms her crew at

one point) who has the, um, odd habit of bumping off her male customers so that chef Duo has fresh ingredients for his "spicy meat buns" (the cannibalism subtext, although it certainly makes explicit the theme of a cruel world inhabited only by predators and prey, never really meshes well with the rest of the film).

A vicious thunderstorm — along with other circumstances too convoluted to delve into — force the East Chamber men to stay several days at the inn with Wei-On and his troops, and numerous mistaken identities, narrow escapes, deceptions, and sword-fights ensue for the remainder of their imprisonment, until Wei-On pleads with Jade to reveal the inn's hidden passageway to him so he may ensure a safe escape for the children. She agrees, but only if Wei-On will agree to, ahem, "satisfy" her lustful cravings for him, a prospect that sits none too well with Mo-Yan. The escape doesn't quite go over as planned, and the tension that filled the claustrophobic confines of the inn culminate in an exciting, fast-paced and gory (suffice to say, Duo's skills with a meat cleaver come in handy) but ultimately tragic battle amid a desert storm.



ageless beauty Lin Ching Hsieh (aka Venus Lin)

The film's lush visual style—candlelit period interiors enlivened by the billowing of colorful fabrics and a downpour of rain—and the rapid-fire approach to action (even in the few scenes not involving swordplay, mid-air battles, or flying arrows, characters will often depart from a room by twirling up and hurtling themselves into the air) are classic Hark. While these are noteworthy elements, they're not really what make *DRAGON INN* so entertaining, and perhaps one of Hark's best works of the past few years. The film has a richness of characterization—heightened by three exceptional performances—that makes the action sequences resonate with much more emotional depth as a result (it is to Lee/Hark's credit that the elongated exposition of the first hour pays off with increased suspense during the climatic battle). Cheung's portrayal, while not in the same league as her work in Stanley Kwan's *ACTRESS*, is particularly impressive: she transforms Jade from a narcissistic thief to a politically enlightened warrior with a seamless grace and effortless elegance, turning Hark's adventure-serial mutation of Nicholas Ray's Western *JOHNNY GUITAR* into a work of surprisingly human complexity, icing on the martial arts action cake.

If *DRAGON INN* fits recognizably within the confines of Hark's usual King Hu-inspired adventure epics, then it's a bit more difficult to know quite how to react to *THE WICKED CITY*, the more recent of the two films and one of Hark's most impressive achievements to date. Director Mak Yai Kit's film — adapted from the Japanese adult animation feature *SUPERNATURAL BEAST CITY* — races through its by-the-numbers pulp SF plot with a hyperkinetic intensity so excessive it borders on the sheer event-garde, a manic approach to cinema as pure sound and fury that makes Hark's other movies look like early Warhol minimalist films. If you can imagine Argento cinematographer Luciano (*SUSPIRIA*) Tovol shooting an amphetamine and hallucinogenic-edged pseudo-film noir fusion of Hark's *I LOVE MARIA* and Shinya Tsukamoto's *TETSUO* films, laced with morbid fascination for bodily mutations worthy of vintage Cronenberg, then you may have some idea of what's in store. Some idea.

The plot—incomprehensible as it may be, given that it's frequently communicated by characters screaming lines of exposition over the deafening roars of various threatening special effects and heavy machinery—involves Ken (Jacky Cheung) and Taki (Leon Lai), two undercover agents working for the "Anti-Reptor

Bureau," a division of Hong Kong law enforcement designed to stop the "raptors," shape-shifting, tentacled creatures—frequently in human form—who feed on human blood and deal "Happiness," a fatal, addictive drug that increases one's strength (oddly, the film never sees fit to explain the creatures' origins).

Ken and Taki are united by the former ties to the raptor underworld—Ken is half-raptor (note his black blood) as a result of an otherworldly mother, while Taki once fell in love with a raptor, Windy, who once saved him from one of her own kind. The two agents—assisted by co-worker Orchid and their supervising Sergeant Orohio (possessed with many telekinetic gifts, most notably the "magneto field force")—are on a quest to capture Daishu, a 150 year old raptor and leader of their community, and his megalomaniacal son Shudo, the actual "Happiness" kingpin, and a betrayer of his father's wishes for peace between the long-fighting human and raptor worlds. Matters are complicated by Orchid's revealed alliance with Shudo, as well as Taki's discovery of Windy's love for Daishu. Ken also finds it difficult to resist his raptor blood, which begins to make his police duties a bit taxing.

In actuality, the story, as such, is communicated more by inference on the creative viewer's part: the film tears through about eight opening minutes of explanatory dialogue, then hits it. It never lets up after that, scene after scene of eyeball-scorching sensory overload and phantasmagoric visual excess so overwhelming that you don't watch *THE WICKED CITY* so much as you are engulfed by it. Indeed, it takes a repeat viewing of the film, not only to appreciate its numerous cinematic strengths (and weaknesses), but to even react to it as a film at all, as opposed to a flood of surreal imagery capable of revolutionizing one's limited view of what allegedly "narrative" film is supposed to be all about.

*THE WICKED CITY* is one the few films I can recall that actually left me physically drained by the end (and I only saw it on video, I can't imagine what the experience of seeing it on the big screen would be like), when the non-stop mindblowing action of the first two acts culminates in a climax that defies description (not to mention gravity). Admittedly, the film doesn't necessarily have the singular clarity of vision that would place it in the uppermost echelon of non-narrative "narrative" cinema (e.g., *INFERNO*), as occasionally the non-existent characterization and

episodic storyline reveal the film to be a bit too skeletal a framework for which to hang its setpieces.

But with these set pieces, who cares? Dig prostitutes who mutate into giant spiders and crawl up hotel walls; the liquid "raptor," a tidal wave-like flood of veined slime which consumes its victims; massive tentacles that rip through floors and ceilings; Dalesque clocks and chandeliers that grow claws and divide into blades, slashing a roomful of raptors; poisoned raptors whose head and limbs explode and rain multi-fluorescent-colored body fluids; the "raptor killer," a seven foot woman who at various points in the film—changes into a pinball machine, an elevator, and a motorcycle, and who spits bullets back out the wound they entered; naked raptors floating high off the ground, strapped to power terminals, sucking the electricity before they dissolve into metallic globules; bodies rocketing through the roofs of cars, back-flipping hundreds of feet in the air, then battling it out suspended over traffic; the "raptor vacuum," which opens up floors to swallow humans, stops time, and enlarges objects to ten times their size; characters also mutate into octopi, deflecting bullets, fly up skyscrapers, surf on incoming Jumbo jets, and . . . My God, I could go on for pages more.

While watching the film with the intent of reviewing it, I initially began to take notes, but finally just had to stop because every scene of *THE WICKED CITY*, if not every frame, is staggering in its over-the-top splendor. It's a never-ending barrage of indescribable hyperactive glory, awash in Bava-esque colored gels and the rain-soaked street reflections of neon and fire. It's a fucking amazing film.

If you're particularly hung up on outmoded Western concepts of linear narrative cinema, then you should probably stick with *DRAGON INN* (not to devalue this excellent film). However, *THE WICKED CITY* is an absolute must-see, if for no other reason than it's one of the most purely incredible films I've experienced in quite some time (although if you're unfamiliar with Hark's work in general, it may be a bit too alienating; use this one as a graduate thesis in Hark). With the third entries in two of Hark's popular ongoing series, the *SWORDSMAN* and *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA* films in release, what's so amazing is not the rate of production, but the way Tsui Hark continues to astonish and entertain, seemingly with no end in sight. At least not until 1997. . .

# ATC LASER DISC GUIDE

BY FORREST BATSON

A stunning blow has been dealt to the Chinese laser disc collector! Most hit titles are now being released as double-disc sets with a \$190 price tag. The reason for this is pure greed since most of these films run under two hours. The side-breaks on these sets are poorly chosen and, except for trailers, they do not offer any extras. On a brighter note, some sets do include some nice stills on the second disc, and one, **SUPERCOP: POLICE STORY III**, is all in CAV.

\*\*\*\*\* Demonstration Quality

\*\*\*\* Excellent Sound/Picture Quality

\*\*\* Good Disc but has flaws

\*\* Below Average

\* Bad Pressing, Poor Quality Sound and Picture

## LEGACY OF RAGE

(1986)

Disc Quality \*\*\*

This Mei Ah disc is letterboxed at 1.85:1 and has monaural sound. The Analog tracks are Cantonese only and the lack of digital sound leads to a rough, over-modulated soundtrack. The picture is clear and clean but the subtitles are blurred on side 2. One of the copies I viewed had mild laser rot on it. The disc is of special interest to collectors since it is a rare effort by the late Brandon Lee.

The picture is letterboxed at 1.85:1 and is clear and clean in all scenes. The Japanese subtitles appear on the frame and the dialogue is Cantonese only. Running time is a full 6 minutes longer than the Hong Kong disc and all scenes of violence are intact. The jacket features over a dozen great stills including a terrific collage on the front cover. At about \$65 this is an affordable must own for any action or laser fan.

## HERO DREAM

(1992)

Disc Quality \*\*

Release date for this Mei Ah disc was 4-17-93. It is mono with Cantonese/digital and Mandarin/analog tracks. The subtitles are clean and easy to read but the picture suffers from breaks, scratches and splices. Letterbox ratio is approximately 1.75:1. The cover features two great shots of Michiko Nishiwaki with and without a bikini! Retail is \$110.

## HARDBOILED

(1992)

Disc Quality \*\*

This double disc set was released in February 1993. The digital mono soundtrack is scratchy and very weak during the action scenes. Side 2 has a poorly chosen side break and both it and side 3 are plagued by scratches, splices and at least 6 blatant cuts in the print. These scenes are not professionally edited out, they are simply snipped from the print! It is letterboxed at 1.85:1 and the framing is correct. The jackets are the same except for a color change in the title card. Running time is 121 minutes. Retail is \$190.

## BLOOD RITUAL

(1988)

Disc Quality \*\*

The jacket for this Ocean Shore release will no doubt grab you with its illustration of a nude body with the title of the film carved on it! It is mono and has Cantonese on both tracks. The picture is scratchy and faded and the subtitles often go off the sides of the pan-and-scan frame. NOTE: All Ocean Shore disc have a copyright date at the start and symbols on both sides of the disc.

## HARDBOILED

(1992) JAPANESE VERSION

Disc Quality \*\*\*\*

Order # PILF-1576

For John Woo fans it is time to celebrate! The ultimate action film is now the ultimate laser disc. It was pressed by Pioneer LDC Japan as a double disc set. The digital mono sound is great and packs a real punch during the action scenes.

For any ATC reader who would like to write Forrest directly, he can be reached at P.O.Box 40094, San Diego, CA 92164.



# BIZARRE SEX AND BODY PARTS

## An Appreciation of *Dr Lamb*

by ERIK SULEV

Tired of the usual? Looking for something slightly different? Then divert your attention toward Hong Kong, where Dr. Lamb desperately tries to discover exactly what's inside a woman. *DR. LAMB* (1992) explores the fascination we have about our objects of desire, through the actions of its "hero," Lam Gor Yu. The lines between love and lust, pleasure and pain, and ultimately sex and death are not just blurred, but entirely erased as all six areas are explored in all possible combinations, with and without the willing participation of his various partners.

Dismissing the film as little more than sleazy trash does the film an injustice. Sure, it's sleazy in terms of the subject matter, and although essentially an exploitation film in any clothing, it's exploitation delivered as only Hong Kong filmmakers can do it. It may be sick and shocking, but the subject matter and characters in the film are treated with respect, resulting in a quality that elevates it far above mere trash. If you don't believe me, meet Dr. Lamb. Believe me, he'll remain with you longer than you'll want him to.

*DR. LAMB* has a "true crime" structure and storyline, which could be generalized as an Asian

version of *HENRY, PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER*. In fact, *DR. LAMB* is actually based on a true case in Hong Kong in which women were kidnapped, killed, screwed and dissected by their killer. If this wasn't enough, he also took the time to experiment with cannibalism with some of his messier victims. Apparently, the cannibalism did surface in the original script for the film, but star Simon Yam felt that it was a little too much, and out of respect for the families of the real life victims, had these parts removed. It's hard to imagine however, how comfortable these people were with what remains in the film, as Lam Gor Yu's "activities" pretty much run the gamut of bad taste.

Surprisingly, *DR. LAMB* was directed by Danny Lee (who also stars as "Lee," the cop who catches Lam and pieces together the extent of his crimes), the Hong Kong star best known for his action roles, especially as the cop opposite Chow Yun Fat in John Woo's *THE KILLER*. You wouldn't think that someone like Lee would be willing to direct a film like *DR. LAMB*, but he did, and did it well. In one impressive scene, Lam pursues his prey through a forest at night during

a fierce rainstorm. The set-up of the sequence and the blue lighting throughout it results in a strong resemblance to an early scene in *SUSPIRIA* as Suzy Banyon (Jessica Harper) arrives at a dance academy and spots a terrified student being chased by an unseen enemy in the Black Forest. The rest of the film is presented clinically, much like Lee's police report, moving back and forth as Lam Gor Yu admits his crime to interrogators.

As Lam Gor Yu, Simon Yam has one of his best roles since *BULLET IN THE HEAD*. It also doesn't hurt that Yam had some practice in the role, since he previously portrayed Lam in a television version of the tale for a popular Hong Kong true crime series. Yam is a talented actor, but he has been stuck in a glut of mostly forgettable Category III softcore sex films, so much in fact, that these days his face is pretty much synonymous with them. *DR. LAMB* earned a Category III rating (equal to an NC-17) for its gruesome sex and violence but at least it's above the usual crap Yam seems to find himself in.

The reason behind Lam's insanity is the over-used "when I was a child, the whores that stayed with my father made my life miserable, so now I hate loose woman" excuse, which is the picture's weakest point. Instead, more should and could have been made out of Lam's introverted behavior, and his natural curiosity which had gotten him into trouble since childhood. Working as a cabbie, Lam picks up unlucky prostitutes, works on ways to kill them, and secretly keeps them in the apartment he shares with several other family members, then experiments on them with the help of a medical textbook. When he slices off the breast of one victim, it's absolutely

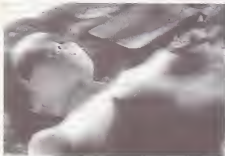
disgusting as the fleshy mound jiggles around in his palm before he dumps it into a jar of formaldehyde for his growing collection of female body parts. Truly a scene that has to be seen to be believed! If that wasn't enough, this breast actually proves to be a scene stealer of its own, when later on it tumbles onto the backs and faces of the alarmed cops searching Lam's dwelling for clues! Only in Hong Kong could you get away with humor in such bad taste and actually make it funny.

What brings Lam to the attention of the police is his interest in photography. After arranging his corpses in various positions, he takes pictures of them, then brings the film to the corner store to be developed, where the understandably alarmed workers notify the police. At first his family stands behind him, but when an examination of his photo albums reveal that he coerced his young niece to pose nude for him while he fondles her, they have to be restrained by the police in their attempts to wring his neck! Most disturbing are the contents of Lam's home videos that have captured his necrophilic urges with the corpse of his latest victim. It's strong stuff that really illustrates the limits that both Lee and Yam were pushing with *DR. LAMB*.

In short, the film is about one man's obsession with the very thing he despises—women. Combined with his own skewed morality, his lust transforms itself into something far more horrifying, and Lam Gor Yu becomes the sole occupant of his own twisted world, creating his own artil images of the perfect woman.

*DR. LAMB* is an excellent example of sexual mania and the strange paths it can take. With the amount of crap that supposedly passes for horror

these days, it's refreshing to actually see an intelligent horror film that does not pander to an audience of idiots, and makes a visual and mental impact. It's a relief to see a recent Hong Kong horror film that is disturbing, and doesn't require continuous comic support, or flying female ghosts to maintain our attention. *DR. LAMB* is an unique and disturbing film that's ideal for those who think they've seen it all. And for those who want to push it to the limit,





*Karl "Baldy" Maka and Sylvia Chang*



# GUNS, GIRLS, ROBOTS & ROCK N'ROLL

A LOOK AT THE ACES GO PLACES SERIES

BY JOHN GRACE

To the Chinese, they are known as the CHOI GAI PAT DONG films (translated as "The Best Partners"). In Europe, Dieter Menz's Atlas International released them as the MAD MISSIONs. American Hong Kong film fans know them by their international title, ACES GO PLACES.

Whether you like 'em or not, the ACES GO PLACES movies launched Hong Kong's never-ending slew of New Wave action comedies (the LUCKY STARS movies, both of Jackie Chen's ARMOUR OF GOD films, GOD OF GAMBLERS and almost every Sammo Hung movie made after EASTERN CONDORS), films that rely heavily on the "Buddy" element. All five films in the series have had tremendous box office success in Asia, and the first installment established Cinema City as a major competitor to Golden Harvest and the Shaw Brothers. They also allowed Sam Hui to escape his "boy next door" persona created by the MR. BOO comedies made with his brothers, and segue into what his brother Michael refers to as "James Bond Fantasy." Karl Maka showcased his energetic comedic ability as the foul-mouthed, clumsy Albert Au (or "Baldy"), the Chinese-American with a shaven head. Sylvia Chang

(arguably one of Hong Kong's best actresses) provides terrific performances as the short-tempered Ah Tung.

In a nutshell, the series follows the exploits of King Kong (Hui), a wiz kid super-thief who teams with police detective Albert Au and his wife, U. Ah Tung, to foil criminal masterminds. All of the movies revolve around a MacGuffin (a cache of diamonds, Terracotta statues, etc.) and combine slapstick, effects, verbal humor, action (guns, martial arts, pyrotechnics, car chases, you name it) and an obligatory Sam Hui song. Deserving of special mention is the ACES GO PLACES theme music. It's an excellent combination of semi-heavy metal guitars, whistling and an 007-type rhythm that will stay in your head for weeks.

In reviewing all 5 films, I occasionally had the opportunity to see both the Cantonese and English dubbed versions. I strongly recommend the Cantonese versions over the bastardized Atlas International forms. In every case the English dubbing supervised by Larry Dolgin, who played the head referee in Stuart Gordon's ROBOJOX, cuts out most of the humor. Since they could not match the original dialogue with the actor's lip movements, the entire meaning of a scene is

changed. They also drop any Pop culture references. However, the English versions contain some extra action scenes that Pen-Asia has cut out of the Chinatown prints.

All 5 films are available in their superior Chinese forms from Pen-Asia Video. The first two films are available, in English, from Canada's Movievideo label. **ACES GO PLACES 3: OUR MAN FROM BOND STREET** is available from Thorn/EMI video as **MAD MISSION 3**.

Some completists may be pized that I didn't include **LUCKY STARS GO PLACES**, the Golden Harvest/Cinema City co-production that nearly killed the careers of Semmo Hung and Karl Maka. . . Well, there is a good reason for that: I haven't seen it!

## ACES GO PLACES

(1982)

Directed by Eric Tsang

The first installment is a fast-paced introduction to our heroes. Director Tsang shows an obvious Blake Edwards influence since the film feels like a **PINK PANTHER** movie filmed on a shoestring budget, but with more interesting personalities. The character interaction between Hui and Maka is very reminiscent of a Crosby and Hope "Road" comedy. The effects are not as prevalent as they are in later installments, but the stuntwork looks dangerous as hell. The opening sequence features a nifty motorized glider.

Mistaking King Kong's heist as the work of a notorious Mafia thief named White Glove (Carol Gordon), the CID brings in Albert Au (Kody Jak in the English version and dubbed with a Telly Savalas-type voice). Baldy is teamed with Ah Tung and together they pose as a married couple. They arrest King Kong and force him to help find the diamonds. King Kong had given the loot to his partner Charlie (Shi Tian of **DRUNKEN MASTER**), who has the clues to the hiding place tattooed on the asses of two lovely girls. One of the girls, called Aika Seltzer, has a brother named Al Capone (Chen Sing, who appears in 4 out of every 5 Hong Kong films). Capone gets pissed when Charlie dates his sister so he has Charlie killed. Capone also gives our heroes hell when they try to get a picture of Aika Seltzer's tattoo.

Meanwhile, White Glove is in Hong Kong to recover the diamonds, because King Kong stole them from a Mafia/Yakuza deal. Everything is settled in the demolition derby showdown, with King Kong using explosive toy cars (years before Eastwood's **THE DEAD POOL**) to eliminate White Glove's henchmen. Also, a romance develops

between Baldy and Ah Tung, not to mention King Kong and Ah Tung's gorgeous sister.

Tsui Hark has a cameo as the director of a ballet performance. In the English version, King Kong is renamed Sam and a minor character named Squashe is called "Big Wang." I've only viewed the English-dubbed version of **ACES GO PLACES** since a subtitled Chinese version is not available in the US. The dubbing isn't bad and the Telly Savalas-like voice is perfect for Maka's character. Not the best in the series, but a good start. Watch for a cameo by Hong Kong pop singer, Lam.



## ACES GO PLACES 2

(1983)

Directed by Eric Tsang

The quintessential Hong Kong action comedy, easily the best in the series. Tsang mixes elements of *Keystone Cops* and Japanese *Santai* television shows to create a masterpiece of slapstick adventure. The pace never lags and there's not one dull moment.

Opening with an incredible attack by a 7 foot robot on King Kong's apartment, **ACES GO PLACES 2** kicks in with a plot that changes course every 10 minutes. King Kong has fallen in love with Juliette (Suzanne Valentino), but there is a catch, she keeps framing him for various heists. Her brother Bozo (Yasueki Kureta) is a notorious gangster who wants to get his hands

on the diamonds stolen in the first film. Filthy Harry (Joe Dimmick, doing a bulls-eye Clint Eastwood imitation) has been hired to kill King Kong and Baldy and so the two teamup for their own survival. In the course of the film it is revealed that Harry is White Glove's brother (Black Gloves). Tsui Hark has a cameo as a lunatic who thinks he's an FBI agent (the film's most memorable gag).

Tsang and screenplay writer Raymond Wong decided to make Kong the sly, cocky hero and turn Baldy into a complete idiot, allowing both Hui and Meka to overact (but that's good). The confusing plot fills the movie with a car chase, a motorcycle chase, foot chases, a bicycle chase, stunt falls, two kung fu fights, a spoof of the finale of SHAFT (with pseudo-Isaac Hayes music), two convincing robots, an army of small robots, a Henry Kissinger impersonator and the wedding of Ah Tung and Baldy.

The robots were supplied by the effects branch of TOHO-EIZO (which explains why this is the most popular MAD MISSION in Japan). The Japanese print is said to contain an additional robot unseen in Chinese and Western versions. The English version contains extra scenes, including King Kong's motorcycle transforming into a jet ski, Baldy evading Filthy Harry, King Kong and Baldy hiding under a truck and some additional fight scene footage that takes place in a nightclub. This version also screws up all of the comedy. Almost every joke is altered or snipped to where it's no longer funny. The subtitled version is the obvious choice to see. Perhaps the worst thing about the English dubbed version is that it removes a music video sequence featuring Hui's smash hit (in Hong Kong), "Friend" in the Atlas version an English interpretation of the song is played over the end credits.

### ACES GO PLACES 3: OUR MAN FROM BOND STREET (1983)

Directed by Tsui Hark

For years I have never understood why so many reviewers chose this mediocrity as the best of the series. Recently, I realized it's probably because it's the most Westernized MAD MISSION. It spoofs the James Bond films and is directed by fan press favorite Tsui Hark so the undeserved praise is understandable. While it shows a lot of imagination, OUR MAN FROM BOND STREET suffers from hyperactive editing, claustrophobic camerawork (a Tsui Hark

trademark) and an opening twenty minutes that is more exciting than the rest of the movie.

King Kong is tricked by a look alike of James Bond (Jean Mersant) and Queen Elizabeth into robbing the Crown Jewels. Baldy and Ah Tung try to set him straight but as usual Kong has stupidly fallen for super babe Jade East (no relation to the cheap men's cologne), who works for the 007 clone. This leads to a series of ter-fetched jewel robberies involving skateboards, Santa Claus, a senseless ROAD WARRIOR satire and the introduction of Ah Tung and Baldy's infant son, Baldy Jr. There is also a terrible ballad by Sam Hui.

Peter Graves plays his Jim Phelps character from the MISSION IMPOSSIBLE TV show, while Richard Kiel portrays a huge thug that's similar to his "Jaws" role in the 007 films. Tsunehara Sugiyama plays Oddjob from GOLDFINGER since the original actor, Harold Sakata, is dead. John Sham plays an Idiot, as he does in all his films.

Although it has a promising (but incomprehensible) beginning that manages to spoof every 007 movie in 10 minutes, OUR MAN FROM BOND STREET suffers from what has plagued so many of those epics; it becomes too ambitious and collapses under its own weight. I have not viewed the Cantonese version but I've been told there is more comedy. However, this film is so pathetic that extra laughs wouldn't help. Note that there's a chase up the Eiffel Tower (filmed on location in Paris) that predates A VIEW TO A KILL by two years!

### ACES GO PLACES 4 (1986)

Directed by Ringo Lam

Excellent. The second best film in the series. There is still plenty of comedy but it has a vicious edge. It's a leaner, meaner MAD MISSION. Unfortunately, the trademark guitar theme is replaced by wimpler synthesizer version.

A scientist (Roy Chiao, of INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM) is conducting a superman experiment by means of a special prism. King Kong has volunteered to become the first superhuman, only to be interrupted by terrorists. Kong and the scientist's daughter (played by Sally Yeh, the blinded nightclub singer in THE KILLER) are the only survivors after a lengthy helicopter-spedboat-chase. Kong returns to Hong Kong and gives the prism to Baldy after a nasty hockey game between the police and CID. Kwan Tak Hing and Shek Kin are the rival



captains coaching the teams. For kung-fu movie fans, this is a nifty in-joke, as Kwan and Shuk played rivals in the "Huang Fei Hung" movies of the fifties and sixties (Jet Lee has recently taken over Kwan's role in *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA*).

Baldy and Kong beat up some terrorists in a lockerroom brawl. The terrorists then kidnap Ah Tung and force Baldy and King Kong to go to New Zealand and return the prism. The climax is a spectacular battle in an underground laboratory/fortress.

The movie's most incredible scene is Ah Tung's kidnapping. A villain pursues Baldy Jr. (now a quick-witted 4 year old) on the roof of a high-rise apartment building. When the kid falls off the roof and hangs by his feet, you could swear they really threw him off the building. Through fast editing, the use of closeups and a convincing stunt double (I hope), Ringo Lam and his second unit create one of the most suspenseful scenes ever put in a comedy.

Ronald Lacey recreates his Nazi character from *RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK*. Incredible car chases (thanks to a New Zealand stunt team), Jackie Chan-style fight scenes (with back-breaking stuntwork), bladder effects (Baldy is transformed into a supermonster), large scale gun battles in the villain's headquarters (a huge indoor set, New Zealand could be another Pinewood Studios), a good Sam Hui song and the always

cute Sally Yeh add up to solid ACES entertainment.

The English version was retitled *MAD MISSION 4: YOU NEVER DIE TWICE*. A five minute prologue with Sam Hui fighting terrorists in a New Zealand bar explains the prism and sets up the story. This scene was probably filmed exclusively for Atlas Films, since all the actors are speaking english (Hui's voice is dubbed though he speaks excellent english) and the footage doesn't fit in with the rest of the film. The Hong Kong version begins with the experiment. All references to Ronald Lacey's role in *RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK* are removed (the Hong Kong version is full of them) and most of the slapstick is gone (could Dieter have wanted these films to be taken seriously in the West?). Hui sings his song in english (with terrible lyrics as a direct translation wouldn't rhyme). A lengthy scene with Hui and Yeh fooling around in an abandoned clothing store is cut, as is a shot where Roy Chiao hits Hui in the groin. The lockerroom brawl is edited differently, with altered background music. There is also an extra scene of Baldy explaining the prism to his British police superior.

After three films of chasing after every hot-looking woman around, King Kong is indifferent to Sally Yeh's character (who chases after him). Maybe it's because his previous targets of lust kept getting him in trouble (Jade East, Juliet, and Ah Tung's sister must not have been worth it).

Ringo Lam went on to direct *CITY ON FIRE*, *PRISON ON FIRE*, *THE UNDECLARED WAR* (an Australian co-production) and the recent *TWIN DRAGONS*. Sadly, this was Sylvia Chang's last appearance in an "Aces Go Places" film. Perhaps it's no coincidence that her character receives a pretty bad beating during the kidnapping sequence.

## ACES GO PLACES 5: THE TERRACOTTA HIT

(1989)

Directed by Lau Kar Leung

The last instalment is a disappointing return to the smaller scale of the earlier films. Ah Tung and Baldy Jr. are written out of the series (they have been sent to Canada). Lau Kar Leung (aka Liu Chia Liang), director of Shaw Brothers' classics like *MASTER KILLER* and *LEGENDARY WEAPONS OF KUNGFU*, uses this directing assignment as an excuse to film some excellent "old style" kungfu reminiscent of his earlier work,

King Kong and Baldy have ended their partnership after a botched rescue mission in Thailand. Baldy needs money to join his wife and child in Canada, so he becomes a gambler (I'm guessing as the subtitles are dropped out during these scenes). King Kong has opened an investment advice firm as both he and Baldy enjoy a life of nonadventure. This is soon disrupted as a brother and sister team of thieves (Leslie Cheung of *A CHINESE GHOST STORY* and *A BETTER TOMORROW* and Nina Li Chi of *TWIN DRAGONS*) have framed them for the robbery of the Excalibur sword from a criminal organization. Conan Lee plays the Chinese Rambo from Mainland China who, along with his assistant swordsman, forces Baldy, King Kong and the brother and sister to join forces and break up the aforementioned league of criminals. It all gets settled in an elaborate kungfu battle that takes place in a warehouse filled with Terracotta statues.

Highlights include excellent kungfu action with Sam Hui doing much of his own stuntwork (except for hard falls). Impressive since he was rumored to have been injured while filming *LEGEND OF WISELY*. Lau Kar Leung and his brother Lau Le Wing staged fights that made me want to rewatch my old tapes of *EIGHT DIAGRAM POLE FIGHTER* and *RETURN OF THE MASTER KILLER*.

It's a breath of fresh air for those of us who are sick of two minute fistbouts that usually populate most Hong Kong "New Wave" films. Karl Maka is his usual ridiculous self and is decent during most of the fight scenes (he starred in various kungfu flicks in the seventies, along with Sammo Hung and Lau's brothers). Nina Li's figure is incredible (before she got that anorexic look for

*TWIN DRAGONS*). Leslie Cheung's performance is fair and there is a good song sung by Cheung and Hui, set to the guitar riffs of "Gimme Some Lovin'." Drawbacks include a terrible, lengthy satire of *PRISON ON FIRE* and *THE LAST EMPEROR* that occurs in the middle of the film. It's long, boring and unfunny (even the cameo by Danny Lee doesn't help). The whole movie has an air of "get out of Hong Kong" to it. Sylvia Chang and Baldy Jr. are missed. This film really is a letdown after the spectacle and thrills of *ACES GO PLACES 4*.

Eagle-eyed viewers will catch Indonesian/Hong Kong action star Billy Chong (*KUNGFU ZOMBIE*) being kicked around by Sam Hui during the warehouse fight. Chong's part was to be bigger but an argument with the director resulted in Chong walking off the set. So far an English dubbed version has not appeared as this one's far too Chinese in origins.

Thus ends the *ACES GO PLACES* saga. Despite the final film's boxoffice success (it made more money in Hong Kong than John Woo's *THE KILLER!*), there are no plans for another one. Sam Hui is retiring from show business and as of this writing was in the middle of his US/Canada Farewell tour. Karl Maka has continued to make action comedies, notably *MAGNIFICENT SCOUNDRELS* and *SKINNY TIGER AND FATTY TIGER*.

*I would like to thank Damon Foster for supplying me with photos and information. His earlier issues of ORIENTAL CINEMA have extensive coverage of the ACES GO PLACES series. Also thanks to Bill Connolly and Rita Meyers for information published in M.A.M.A.*

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## LOSERS ON PARADE (Part Two)

a continuing filography by Chris D.

Before we continue with the alphabetical listings, I want to correct some misinformation on the *BURAI* series. *BURAI-KOKU BIRUBI* should read *BURAI-KOKU HYODSU* and *BURAI-KOROSE* should read *BURAI-BARASE*. *BURAI* is only a six title series (the ones listed as 1-5). *DAI-KANBU-KERI O TSUKERO* is #2 in the two film series also featuring Watan Tetsuya. The first one (which I didn't list) is called *DAI KANBU-ORIKOMI* (1966), dir. Toshiro Masuda.

**GOKUDO (SCOUNDREL)** 1968 92 Min. Dir. Yamashita Kosaku w/Tomisauro Wakayama, Koji Tsuruta. The late great Wakayama - Ito Ogami in the Baby Cart films and Shintaro 'Zatoichi' Katsu's brother - plays a bumbling, small-time Yakuza boss in this eleven film comedy/action/drama series. Strangely that this turned into a series since "Gokudo" gets shot about 20 times while taking revenge on a betraying clan boss - a couple of times in the head! - then appears to blow himself up with a grenade as the cops close in. Oh well, that's why I love these movies. Other titles, all with Wakayama and directed by Yamashita except where noted: #2 **KAETIKITA GOKUDO (SCOUNDREL'S CHILDISH TEMPER)** 1968, #3 **HEITAI GOKUDO (SOLDIER SCOUNDREL)** 1968 Dir. Kiyoshi Saeki, #4 **MATTEI ITA GOKUDO (SCOUNDREL LIVES FOR THE STAGE)** 1969, #5 **TABI NI DETA GOKUDO (SCOUNDREL MAKES AN EXIT)** 1969 Dir. Junya Sato, #6 **GOKUDO AMAGA SAKINI KAERU** 1970, #7 **GOKUDO KYOJOTABI (FUGITIVE SCOUNDREL)** 1970, #8 **GOKUDO MAKAKITORU** 1972 Dir. Shigahiro Ozawa, #9 **KAMAGASAKI GOKUDO** 1973, #10 **GOKUDO VS FURYO BANCHO** 1974. Toei Studios were obviously seeing diminishing returns on all three of their violent onme comedy series, thus the hybridization here and on the final title. #11 **GOKUDO VS. MAMUJHI BROTHERS** 1974 Dir. Sadao Nakajima VHS=Toei

**GOLGO 13** 1973 104 Min. Dir. Junya Sato w/Takakura Ken, Banai Pui, Sorabi Mossima. First live action film from the extremely popular comic about the stoic hitman. It's a stretch including **GOLGO 13** as Yakuza films.

**GOLGO 13 — KURYU-NO KUBI (aka GOLGO 13 — KOWLOON ASSIGNMENT)** 1977/83 Min. Dir. Yukio Noda w/Shinichi 'Sonny' Chiba, Etsuko 'Sue' Shiomi, Koji Tsuruta. \*\*\* VHS=Toei

**GYASOGU CHUSHINGURA** 1963 93 Min. Dir. Shigahiro Ozawa w/Chiezo Katsuka, Takakura Ken, Koji Tsuruta. Occasionally moving (before Ken knocks himself off), occasionally absurd Yakuza version of the *LOYAL 47 RONIN* samurai story. At the shoot-em-up climax the story dissolves into a live-action cartoon. This is #8 in an 11 film series, **GYANGU (GANG)**, 1961 to 1967. \*\*\*

**HANA TO RYU (FLOWER AND DRAGON)** Dir. Toshiro Masuda w/Yuho Ichiyama. In the snowy climax, Ichiyama

fights off swords with his bare hands. Toei samada this popular film in 1965 starring Kinoshita Nakamura and directed by Shigahiro Ozawa. \*\*\* VHS=Nikkatsu

**HEITAI YAKUZA (HOODLUM SOLDIER)** 1965 103 Min. Dir. Yasuzo Masumura. Justly famous anti-war film from the stories about a Yakuza gambler (Shintaro 'Zatoichi' Katsu) drafted into the Japanese army during WW2 who makes friends with another outcast (a pacifist intellectual (Takashi Tamura). Exuberantly kinetic, irreverent, funny, violent and perversely. I was entertained (despite the lack of sub-titles). Masumura also directed the following over-the-top masterpieces: **RED ANGEL (AKAI TENSHI)**, **BLOOD BEAST (MOJU)**, **THE SNARE (HANGO THE BLADE #2)**. #1 in the series. \*\*\*\* VHS=Dai

Others in the series:  
**ZOKU HEITAI YAKUZA #2 (RETURN THE HOODLUM SOLDIER)** 1965 92 Min. Dir. Tokuzo Tanaka w/Shintaro Katsu, Takahiro Tamura, Akiko Ogawa. \*\*\* VHS=Dai  
**SHIN HEITAI YAKUZA #3 (ANOTHER HOODLUM SOLDIER)** 1966 86 Min. Dir. Tokuzo Tanaka w/Shintaro Katsu, Takahiro Tamura, Michiko Sage.  
**HEITAI YAKUZA OATSU GOKU (#4) (HOODLUM SOLDIER'S ESCAPE)** 1966 80 Min. Dir. Issai Mon w/Shintaro Katsu, Takahiro Tamura. \*\*\* VHS=Dai  
**HEITAI YAKUZA OATSU (#5) (HOODLUM SOLDIER'S FLIGHT TO FREEDOM)** 1966 88 Min. Dir. Tokuzo Tanaka w/Shintaro Katsu, Takahiro Tamura. \*\*\* VHS=Dai  
**HEITAI YAKUZA OREN MAKASERO #6** 1967 89 Min. Dir. Tokuzo Tanaka w/Shintaro Katsu, Takahiro Tamura  
**HEITAI YAKUZA NAGURI KOMI #7** 1967 89 Min. Dir. Tokuzo Tanaka w/Shintaro Katsu, Takahiro Tamura  
**HEITAI YAKUZA GOCATSU #8** 1966 80 Min. Dir. Tokuzo Tanaka w/Shintaro Katsu. \*\*\*\* VHS=Dai  
**SHIN HEITAI YAKUZA KASEN #9** 1972 92 Min. Dir. Shintaro Katsu w/Shintaro Katsu, Takahiro Tamura. All titles in series, Dai Production

**HIBOTAN BAKUTO (WOMAN GAMBLER)** 1966 98 Min. Dir. Yamashita Kosaku w/Junko Fuji, Takakura Ken, Tomisauro Wakayama. First in a series with Fuji as a woman gambler in 1920s Japan. #1 in the series. \*\*\*\* VHS=Toei

**HIBOTAN BAKUTO — ISSHUKU IPPAN (WOMAN GAMBLER — A BOWL OF RICE AND A PLACE TO SLEEP)** 1966 95 Min. Dir. Norifumi Suzuki w/Junko Fuji,

Koji Tsuruta, Bunta Sugawara, Tomisaburo Wakayama  
#2 in the series. \*\*\*\* VHS=Toei

HIBOTAN BAKUTO — HANA FUDA SHOBU (WOMAN  
GAMBLER — FLOWER CARD SHOWDOWN) 1969 98  
Min. Dir. Tai Kato w/Junko Fuji, Takakura Ken,  
Tomisaburo Wakayama. #3 in the series. \*\*\*\*

HIBOTAN BAKUTO — NIDAME SHUMEI 1969 95 Min.  
Dir. Shigehiro Ozawa w/Junko Fuji, Takakura Ken,  
Kanjiro Asahi. #4 in the series. VHS=Toei

HIBOTAN BAKUTO — TEKKABA RETSUDEN 1969 110  
Min. Dir. Yamashita Kosaku w/Junko Fuji, Koji Tsuruta,  
Tomisaburo Wakayama. #5 in the series. VHS=Toei

HIBOTAN BAKUTO — ORYU SANJYO (WOMAN  
GAMBLER — ORYU'S ALLIES) 1970 99 Min. Dir. Tai Kato  
w/Junko Fuji, Bunta Sugawara, Tomisaburo Wakayama.  
#6 in the series. \*\*\*\* VHS=Toei

HIBOTAN BAKUTO — ONICHI ITADAKIMASU  
(WOMAN GAMBLER — DEATH TO THE WICKED) 1971  
93 Min. Dir. Tai Kato w/Junko Fuji, Koji Tsuruta,  
Tomisaburo Wakayama. #7 in the series. \*\*\*\*

HIBOTAN BAKUTO — JINGI TOSHIMASU (WOMAN  
GAMBLER — ON THE ETERNAL JUST PATH) 1972 95  
Min. Dir. Takaichi Sato w/Junko Fuji, Bunta Sugawara,  
Chizuru Katsuki, Tomisaburo Wakayama. #8 \*\*\*

HOKURIKU DAIRI SENZA (AGENT OF WAR OF THE  
NORTH) Dir. Kinji Fukasaku w/Hiroki Matsukida. Ineana  
tale of a Yakuza located in a Northern coastal town hell  
bent on keeping control of the rackets in his neck of the  
woods. Scenes where his enemies are buried up to their  
necks in the snow with peeps aimed at their heads are a  
bit hard to take, no matter how fake. Violent and  
unrepentant. \*\*\* VHS=Toei

HANA TO DOTO (FLOWER AND THE ANGRY WAVES)  
1964 92 Min. Dir. Seijun Suzuki w/Akira Kobayashi,  
Naoko Kubo. Suzuki is one of the great unsung directors  
of world cinema, with a visual kinship to other masters  
such as Hitchcock, Fellini, Fuller, Lynch, Bunuel and  
pathways Antonioni crossed with Russ Meyer. Kobayashi  
is the young hero of a coal union up against a rival evil  
clan. With Tamio Kawachi as a sword-wielding assassin  
in Zorro cape-and-hat. \*\*\*\* VHS=Nikkatsu

IREZUMI ICHIDAI (TATTOOED LIFE or TATTOOED  
GENERATION) 1965 87 Min. Dir. Seijun Suzuki w/Hideaki  
Takahashi, Motoichi Hara. In 20s Japan, Takahashi kills  
a rival Yakuza clan leader, then is forced to flee to a rural  
mining community with his sensitive, artistic buddy.  
Wildly energetic with Suzuki's usual surreal sense of  
visual humor. A police detective with bright red shoes  
tracks Takahashi down only to be dispatched by the  
mining community's Yakuza clan. The climatic showdown  
revenge-binge has a startling use of theatricalized  
lighting and effects (it takes place during a violent

thunderstorm) and daunts the slightly yellowish tint.  
Suzuki's use of contrasting colors rivals Hitchcock or  
Bava. Star Takahashi also appeared in the Nikkatsu  
Yakuza series OTOKO NO MONSHO. \*\*\*\* Nikkatsu

JIGOKU NO HAMONJO (HELL CONVENTION or  
CONCLAVE IN HELL) 1969 89 Min. Dir. Toshio Masuda  
w/Akira Kobayashi, Jyo Shihido, Hideaki Takahashi,  
Wataru Tetsuya. Haven't seen this but it sounds awesome  
with four-out-of-five of the reigning Nikkatsu superstars of  
cheivorous mayhem

JINSEI GEEKISHO — HISHAKAKU 1963 Dir. Tadashi  
Sawashima w/Koji Tsuruta, Yoshiko Sakuma. One of the  
early seminal Yakuza films according to Japanese critic  
Tadato Sato. There are 3 Toei sequels as well as alternate  
versions that were filmed in 1966, 1962 and 1964 by  
Nikkatsu and 1972 by Shochiku. In 1983, a disappointing  
"prestige" version by Toei was made.

JINGI NO HAKABA (BURIAL OF THE GAMBLER'S  
CODE or LOYALTY UNTIL DEATH or PSYCHO JUNKIE)  
1975 84 Min. Dir. Kinji Fukasaku w/Wataru Tetsuya,  
Tatsuo Uemura, Noboru Ando. Amazing saga set in  
post-war Japan of homicidic sociopath loser who can't  
get along with his fellow loser buddies. While fleeing a  
gambling den that he and his pals just knocked off,  
Tetsuya ducks into an innocent woman's apartment. He  
ends up raping her while waiting for the coast to clear.  
Something about her draws him back and he falls in  
love. But he's a dysfunctional type of guy (that's an  
understatement) and his love and ways of showing it are  
constantly at odds with the girl's expanance. She does  
however gradually start to care for him. Tetsuya, in  
deeper and deeper trouble with the clan he belongs to,  
gets slapped around by his boss that causes him to  
return later and stab the guy. He's now an outcast with  
a contract on his life. He does the pinkie trimming scene  
in an attempt to beat the heat, bringing an uneasy truce.

He remains an outcast though and begins hanging  
out with a junkie after being introduced to the pleasures  
of heroin by a more degenerate than usual prostitute.  
Meanwhile, his girl has contracted tuberculosis. She is  
constantly coughing up blood and despairing of  
Tetsuya's continuing drug addiction, decides to bid adieu  
to this cruel world. Tetsuya wakes up one morning to  
find she has slit her wrist. This really pushes him over the  
edge. After her cremation, he takes her ashes and few  
remaining bones and heads over to his boss' pad.  
Everyone is alarmed at his deeply depressed state and  
when he takes out his girl's bones and begins to eat  
them, they explode. Tetsuya and his junkie friend have a  
shootout with the cops, then he's stabbed repeatedly by  
his old Yakuza brothers. Yet still, he doesn't die. Finally,  
he jumps from the prison hospital roof to his death.  
Thrillingly awesome, this is definitely Fukasaku's best  
film. It's almost as if he decided to let all the insanity  
bubbling underneath the surface in his other movies  
emerge in full poisonous flower.

\*\*\*\* (I just had to go the 4 star rating one better!)

(End Of Part 2)



## TOHO'S VAMPIRE MOVIES: THE BLOODTHIRSTY SERIES

BY MARK ROLLIE

Mention the name Toho to a movie buff and the immediate picture that appears would be that of Godzilla leveling another District in Tokyo. Press the person further and he may associate Toho with many of the films of Akira Kurosawa. However, after that it's very likely the film fan will draw a blank. While Toho is mainly known in America as the studio behind Godzilla and a host of other giant monsters, they have also been responsible for other forays into fantasy, ones that have nothing to do with angry reptiles.

One such series came about in the seventies. Known as the "Bloodthirsty" series, it was made

up of three films: **BLOODTHIRSTY DOLL**, **BLOODTHIRSTY EYES** and **BLOODTHIRSTY ROSE**. They shared, for the most part, the same production crews with Michio Yamamoto (whose first film, **TERROR IN THE STREETS**, is a highly regarded thriller) directing all three; Ei Ogawa co-writing the screenplays for the series; and Ritsiro Manabe providing the music throughout the trilogy. While the films are Japanese productions they also show a very noticeable Western-styled influence regarding the storylines and direction.

The first of these, **BLOODTHIRSTY DOLL** (1970, CHI O SUU NING'YO; aka **THE VAMPIRE**



DOLL) concerns a woman's search for her missing sibling. Once at the house, she finds out from the fiancé's mother that the girl is dead and her brother had left the house a few days ago. Being suspicious, Kaiko and her boyfriend (who has accompanied her on this trek) stay the night, which is filled with the horror-film clichés of weird sounds, skulking figures, a dim-witted servant who may be more than a bit dangerous and a mysterious doctor who has known the family for years and seems aware of more than he's telling.

The film is short (71 minutes) and moves at a deliberate pace, but is never boring. Director Yamamoto was able to give the story a hazy, mysterious dream-like quality, with events more heard than seen. There is very little blood on display, nothing more than the routine two holes in the neck, until the doctor's death, when the ghost/vampire slashes his throat, resulting in a bleeding that suggests the artery must have the same pressure as water lines in a big city. This bit takes one by surprise and is quite frightening, but the best shock scene is simply a few birds flying up into view during a walk in a field. It comes completely without warning.

While the horror movie clichés are there, one extra touch is the fact that the ghost/vampire's eyes glow that gives the figure an other-worldly appearance. Otherwise, there isn't much in the way of Japanese origins in this film, save for the location and the score by Mabebe. Other critics have pointed out that the series seemed to copy the atmosphere of Britain's Hammer Films, which Toho at times succeeded in doing.

Succeed they did in *BLOODTHIRSTY EYES* (1971, *CHI O SUU ME*; aka *LAKE OF DRACULA*), which turns out to be more of a traditional vampire movie, at least by Western customs. A coffin arrives by truck and is dropped off at a station. Soon various locals are acting peculiar, and a vampire is suspected. An artist, Akiko, is positive a vampire is running around while her room-mate sister and doctor boyfriend have their doubts. Akiko is still troubled by an incident from her childhood that involved finding an old castle and discovering a vampire within. Akiko has dismissed the memory as only a bad dream, but soon finds proof that it actually happened and does indeed locate the old house not too far from where she lives. Her boyfriend doesn't believe any of it, however this character is dimwitted to the point of being brain-dead; confronted with evidence and seeing vampirism right before his eyes, he still refuses to believe such a thing is possible.

It all winds up inside the vampire's house and ends when he is thrown off a balcony by the reanimated corpse of his father (reanimated by guilt, apparently — it just happens!) and falls on the upright sword. It makes one think that either Yamamoto or Ogawa saw *RETURN OF DRACULA* (1958) when they were young and liked that film's ending.

Yamamoto's visual sense is even stronger here, with some excellent compositions. The red sky and dark house both convey an eeriness and a sense that the director cared about what he was making and used some artistic visual touches to create atmosphere (long before Coppola's *DRACULA*) and making the most of what was, even back in 1971, a tired genre. Yamamoto repeats the glowing eyes from *BLOODTHIRSTY DOLL*, which is a nice touch.

Released in the US by United Productions of America, the Dracula name is meant only as a commercial hook for Western audiences, as the vampire himself is a completely different character. UPA was also responsible for a bit of editing, reducing the original running time of 82 minutes to 79 by eliminating some of the gore, especially the bloodsucker's death at the film's end. While several impalement shots survive on US TV prints, the vampire's meltdown has been eliminated. The dubbing is also below par, especially the voice used for the creature of the night, who sounds like a poor man's Bela Lugosi!

Next came *BLOODTHIRSTY ROSE* (1974, *CHI O SUU BARA*; aka *EVIL OF DRACULA*) and at 84 minutes, the longest of the group. While the general look and tone of the previous two films may remind one of Hammer Studios, *BLOODTHIRSTY ROSE* takes it a step further



from *Bloodthirsty Rose* (*Chi O Suu Bara*)

and uses a story similar in numerous ways to Hammer's *LUST FOR A VAMPIRE*, both using a girls' school as the setting and even contains the resident nutty instructor. The male vampire in *ROSE* even looks a little like the late Ralph Bates who starred in the Hammer film.

The story centers on a teacher, Shiraki, who accepts a new job assignment in a rural girls school. At the home of the principal he sees two women, one dripping with blood. He later finds out that one of them is a student who has been missing for days and the other is the principal's wife, recently killed in an automobile accident. Shiraki convinces himself it was only a dream.

Shiraki finds out that he will soon become the new principal of the school that has had a history of disappearing students. The school doctor is convinced that it has something to do with vampires and while looking for proof, happens upon a vampire attack and loses his life in the process. Shiraki tries to tell the police about the undead theory but as usual, gets laughed at.

Doing a little detective work, he discovers that a former teacher was placed in an asylum. From

him Shiraki learns that for generations, the principal and his wife, both vampires, have been living off the students. He hurries back to the school where he finds a student being sucked dry by the principal. Shiraki grabs a fireplace poker and runs it through the vampire, which kills not only him but his spiritually linked wife as well. The two slowly rot away as the viewer is on his way to another happy ending.

*BLOODTHIRSTY ROSE* drops the golden eye established in the first two films, and gives us a couple doing all the dirty work this time around. At least UPA kept the disintegration scene intact. Once again the *Dracula* name was used in the film's US title for an easy sell, but the character of the vampiric principal is no relation. The rose found in the film's title refers to one kept by a victim that changes color to signify the draining away of her life as she becomes a vampire.

The series is a remarkable one that shows Toho was quite capable of producing screen monsters other than *Godzilla*, and for breathing new life into some old storylines that most of us had thought were long past their prime.



from *Bloodthirsty Doll* (Chi O Sui Ningyo)

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Woo Saik-Hong